

# Designing Effective Content-Literacy Professional Development

by Julie Meltzer and Melvina Phillips

Everyone acknowledges that improving students' literacy habits and skills is a good thing. However, content teachers at local middle and high schools do not always think it is their job. Even when teachers attempt to embed literacy practices into their content teaching and instructional practices, they do not always feel proficient or understand how to do this most effectively. Teachers need more than just a workshop or two if they are expected to be able to provide quality content-literacy instruction. How can school and district leaders best support content-area teachers to take responsibility for providing quality literacy instruction as part of content-area teaching and learning? Consider two possible scenarios:

*Scenario 1:* The district provides three mandatory professional development sessions on content reading and vocabulary strategies. The examples provided are generic, and most are taken from English language arts. Some teachers try some of the strategies; many do not. Classroom instruction is minimally affected. School and district leaders are frustrated. Students lose ground. Test scores stay flat.

*Scenario 2:* After looking at the reading and vocabulary assessment results, the middle and high school literacy leadership team agrees that a focus on improving content-area reading and vocabulary development needs to be a priority. The team members present the data to the faculty and ask the faculty to brainstorm what students and teachers would be doing differently and what the environment would be like if a schoolwide effort to improve content literacy and learning were successful. Then, in content-area groups, teachers discuss what types of professional development would best support them to become proficient with literacy instructional practices relevant to teaching and learning in their content areas. Multiple opportunities for professional development are planned. Some of the professional development occurs in mixed-content groups, stressing the foundational reading and thinking skills that undergird academic success across content areas. Other professional development

occurs within departments, deepening the application of the cross-content instructional strategies to help students meet the specific literacy demands of the content area. Teachers learn how to use a protocol to look at student work, meet regularly to discuss and refine the use of the literacy support strategies, learn to use a strategic lesson planning model, learn to teach students using the gradual-release-of-responsibility model, learn how to engage students in school-based reading and writing through the use of collaborative routines, and learn to do peer mentoring. Administrative walk-throughs focus on evidence of changes in classroom practice aligned with teacher professional development. The data show students are more engaged, and the next round of test results shows improvement.

Scenario 2 can be your school. What will it take to make it happen?

Content-literacy professional development differs from many other types of teacher professional development because it involves teaching and learning within and across content areas. Content-literacy professional development focuses on the literacy and learning skills that form the foundation for academic success: supporting students to become strategic readers, proficient writers, effective speakers and presenters, skillful investigators, and critical and creative thinkers across content areas. Research tells us that practicing new strategies and skills *within the context* where they are expected to be performed is most effective. Content teachers are the best people to provide this instruction, because they are the ones who know the types of reading, writing, and thinking needed in the disciplines they teach. For example, vocabulary development needs to be a focus in *each* content area. You would not want the English teacher deciding what the most important words to teach in science or the most important concepts to stress in math should be. Therefore it makes sense that content teachers be the ones who ensure that students are developing the literacy and learning skills in their content area.

Once teachers understand what it means to teach students to be readers of science, writers of history, presenters of problem-solving approaches, they realize they are not being asked to teach basic reading and writing. Once teachers realize what students do not know how to do—and they learn strategies for how to teach students to do these things—panic about not knowing enough to teach reading and writing abates. And once there is a common language and set of strategies being taught, teachers can begin to build upon the instruction in other classes and work collaboratively to engage students in content-area reading and writing. Even more importantly, students can begin to take ownership of their learning, the goal of all teaching.

## Five Essential Keys

Working with school literacy leadership teams from Alabama to Maine—and many states in between!—we have learned there are five keys to effective content-literacy teacher professional development.

- 1. There has to be a clear purpose and goals for the professional development being offered.** Literacy professional development has to be clearly connected to data on student performance or acknowledged student needs. Too often, professional development is planned because a presenter is considered engaging and entertaining, but little consideration is given to why the professional development is needed. If the professional development is not targeted to improving instructional practices that will have a significant impact on student performance, then the money is not well spent. Teachers need to understand the goal of the professional development, and they should have clear guidelines for implementing instructional strategies or practices learned as a result of the professional development. For example, the expectation might be that all teachers set a professional learning goal related to improving content-literacy instruction. Or administrators may declare a focus on vocabulary development and use literacy walk-throughs to look for evidence that vocabulary is being emphasized in all content classrooms.
- 2. Content literacy professional development needs to be sustained over time and involve multiple types of support.** It is obvious that one-shot professional development workshops do not work. Instead,

literacy professional development must be sustained and nurtured through ongoing opportunities for practice, coaching, and dialogue. The literacy leadership team should analyze and respond to the needs of teachers with a comprehensive professional development plan and put into place a strong supportive coaching model. Coaching support can be offered by a literacy coach or through peer coaching, or it can occur during opportunities for shared teaching. No matter which model is chosen, the schedule and culture should be supportive of opportunities for *teachers to discuss, practice, and plan with other teachers how they will use the instructional strategies learned in workshops or other professional development opportunities.*

- 3. Content-literacy professional development has to be connected to professional communities of practice.** Grade-level teams plan integrated units of study, during which they select and successfully use common literacy strategies across the content areas. This provides students with the opportunity to expand and transfer their understanding of strategy use across content areas. Professional conversations within specific departments allow teachers to discuss the literacy demands of their specific content area. Through these discussions, teachers can select common strategies that best support students with reading, writing, discussing, and researching content-specific text more successfully. Professional learning groups provide a platform structure for teachers who share a common interest in a specific literacy topic or instructional strategy to deepen their practice. Book studies, video of classroom footage, and other resources may be used to further the groups' understanding of literacy best practices. Teachers can conduct action research to identify which strategies work best with their students. Each of these opportunities to work and learn from one another also provides direction for further professional development or coaching.
- 4. Content-literacy professional development has to be connected to what teachers are responsible for teaching and has to help them to do that well.** This should be a given, but how often do we hear teachers complain that "the workshop did not help me at all to improve my instructional practices in my content area." There are general literacy topics that can be beneficial for the entire faculty,

but the most effective content-literacy professional development for middle and high school teachers includes a departmental focus. Literacy leaders need to understand that content-area examples must be provided and that the professional development has to focus on content learning, not literacy strategies. For example, math teachers meet with a consultant to learn how to use the literacy instructional strategies most relevant to math teaching and learning, such as vocabulary development strategies, ways to teach students how to read and write mathematical text, graphic organizers for problem solving, and rubrics to judge explanations of how problems were solved. This enables the math teachers to strategically plan lessons that embed literacy best practices into the math class. Strategies need to be connected to content-learning goals—scaffolding the reading/learning process by providing ways for students to interact with text before, during, and after reading/learning. Strategies also have to be focused on the types of literacy skills that students need to work on in each area.

**5. Content-literacy professional development has to include equal measures of support and accountability.** In our work in developing “A Model for Improving Adolescent Literacy” (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2006), we talked with principals and literacy coaches throughout the country to determine how these leaders provided support to teachers to change and improve content-literacy instruction and classroom practices. Those with whom we spoke stressed a combination of support and accountability as necessary ingredients. Four synergistic approaches for teacher development emerged in both the conversations and the literature, many of which have been discussed so far in this article:

- Professional learning communities
- Making the work public
- Literacy coaching
- Teacher professional development (sequences of workshops, courses, etc.)

Figure 1 highlights a quote connected to each of these for your literacy leadership team to discuss. Then the team can determine how each of these might be supported to occur in your school.



Figure 1. Four structures to support teachers

## Supporting Effective Instruction and Planning

Four ways that school leaders can support effective content-literacy instruction and ensure that it is occurring in most classrooms include observing in classrooms, taking literacy walk-throughs, tying the literacy improvement focus to teacher evaluation, and making sure that new teacher induction includes bringing new hires up to speed with the expectations for content-literacy instruction. School leaders develop procedures and protocols to guarantee that each of the components is scheduled and in place. It is helpful to have the literacy leadership team advise administrators how to make the actions as helpful as possible to teachers.

Effective planning for content-literacy teacher professional development is critical. Literacy leadership teams should look at the calendar for the upcoming school year and determine how to best use available time to successfully focus on literacy improvement. How can workshop or release days be best used? How about department or team meetings? faculty meetings? Is it possible to provide stipends or professional development credit when people participate in “dine and discuss” sessions or “bagels and books” meetings? How can those who go to conferences be best supported to share their learning? Figure 2 shows a professional development planning template that will be helpful as you plan and think about how to best design content literacy professional development at your school.

**Goal:** (Goal statement should say what teachers should do and what students should be able to do as a result.)

Focus of the PD Event/Activity	Teacher/Admin Participants and Target Student Population	When and Where	PD Provider	Lead	Support and Monitoring Strategies
Event/Activity 1					
Event/Activity 2					

Figure 2. Elements of an effective professional development plan

Supporting teachers to improve instruction is an essential component for achieving a successful schoolwide literacy initiative. If your goal as a literacy leader is to truly impact student achievement and improve literacy and learning, then teachers need the framework of a professional learning community such as that described in Scenario 2 at the beginning of this article. Literacy instructional practices across the content areas will not improve in middle and high schools without well-designed and sustained professional development efforts that build teacher capacity and include multiple support and accountability measures and foster a culture of collegiality and sharing of ideas and practices.

*Note to the reader:* This article provides an important framework for beginning the discussion and developing a supportive professional culture of inquiry, learning, and action. For more information, we suggest that school leaders read Chapters 6 and 9 in the book *Taking Action on Adolescent Literacy: An Implementation Guide for School Leaders* (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007).

## References

Eaker, R., DuFour, R. , & DuFour, R. (2002). *Getting started: Reculturing schools to become professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Services.

International Reading Association. (2006). *Standards for middle and high school literacy coaches*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Irvin, J., Meltzer, J., & Dukes, M. (2007). *Taking action on adolescent literacy: An implementation guide for school leaders*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Putnam, R. T., & Borko, H. (2000). What do new views of knowledge and thinking have to say about research on teaching learning? *Educational Researcher*, 29(1). 5.

---

*Julie Meltzer is a Senior Advisor for Strategy, Research and Design at Public Consulting Group’s Center for Resource Management. She helped develop A Leadership Model for Improving Adolescent Literacy (2006) and is the author of the Adolescent Literacy Support Framework (2002).*

*Melvina Phillips is a Senior Literacy Consultant at Public Consulting Group’s Center for Resource Management. Dr. Phillips is also a lead consultant to the highly successful Alabama Reading Initiative.*

*Dr. Meltzer and Dr. Phillips are two of the co-authors of Meeting the Challenge of Adolescent Literacy: Practical Ideas for Literacy Leaders, which will be published by the International Reading Association in October.*