What RTI Means for Content Area Teachers

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I was introducing my content area literacy course to a new group of social studies, language arts, music, and art preservice teachers and feeling confident about my focus. I told them that they would not be teachers of reading, but that I would be showing them ways to use literacy as a tool to support their teaching of content.

I was ready to move on, when Alan (pseudonym), an art major, raised his hand. "Wait a minute," he said, "you mean we're not going to learn how to teach reading in this class?" "No," I replied, "you're going to learn how to use literacy as a tool to help you teach art." Alan countered, "But my students can't read. If I don't teach them how to read, who will? I really want to learn how to help my students read better." I asked the class how many agreed with Alan. The majority raised their hands.

Is it reasonable for teachers like Alan to have students' reading development as an instructional goal? In some ways, I applaud this thinking; on the other hand, how feasible is it that an art teacher should teach reading? Although I admire Alan's motivation, I agree with Rissman, Miller, and Torgesen (2009) who wrote,

> While it is clear that content area teachers cannot be expected to teach struggling readers basic reading skills, they can help students develop the knowledge, reading, strategies, and thinking skills to understand and learn from increasingly complex text in their content areas. (p. 13)

That should be Alan's goal.

The teaching of literacy in content area classrooms is not a new idea. What is new, however, is that recent federal legislation, Response to Intervention (RTI), is having an impact on the role of content area teachers. I would like to suggest that content area teachers can support students' reading development within the RTI framework, but that this effort must mean more than going through the motions if student literacy is to increase.

What Is RTI?

RTI is part of the 2004 reauthorization of the federal initiative, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). RTI is based on the theory that some struggling readers have not had sufficient opportunities for learning (Vellutino & Fletcher, 2005). The legislation is designed to give students multiple opportunities to learn before referring them for special education testing.

RTI has been developed in elementary schools using a three-tier system (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008). Tier 1 is focused on providing effective classroom reading instruction for all students. In elementary schools, this instruction could come from a core reading program, literature, or a combination of both. When students do not respond to effective classroom instruction and that gap is documented, they are eligible for Tier 2 intervention, which consists of targeted instruction, either with an intervention program or an individualized approach that addresses students' specific needs. The students who have shown reading growth after Tier 2 intervention are eligible for Tier 3, which is typically intensive one-on-one instruction. Students' progress is monitored and if they have not responded to Tier 3 intervention, they will most likely be identified as having a learning disability (Fuchs et al., 2008).

Elementary programs using the RTI framework use an assessment protocol to determine whether students need Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3 instruction. Often a universal screening assessment is used to find out which students need Tier 2 instruction. Students in Tier 2 have their progress monitored to determine whether or not they are actually responding to the intervention.

Students are also given a summative assessment to determine whether they have met benchmark goals. Students may also be given a diagnostic test to determine specific reading problems. In addition, teachers give informal curriculum-embedded, formative assessments to make instructional decisions and to determine students' content knowledge.

RTI in Secondary Schools

Educators have tried to develop state and district policy that incorporates the three-tier system and assessments used at the elementary level into secondary schools, but this move has been criticized by secondary school experts such as Brozo (2009). Johnson, Smith, and Harris (2009) suggest that although the RTI legislation was written as a measure to change the identification of special education students, there are additional purposes for RTI in the secondary schools. They write, "RTI is a schoolwide initiative that has as its ultimate goal school improvement across the K–12 grade-level spectrum" (p. 2).

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These authors state that RTI in secondary schools has three purposes: (1) to build capacity to meet graduation standards, (2) to ensure appropriate instruction and intervention, and (3) to provide a system of continuous school improvement. None of these goals can be met without a change in the way literacy is taught in content area classrooms. According to Brozo, "If content teachers fail to offer responsive literacy instruction to benefit every student and differentiated assistance for those in need of extra help then the preventive potential of RTI is lost" (p. 280).

In this commentary, I suggest ways in which content area teachers can provide Tier 1 instruction within the RTI framework. My main points are that the language of RTI, which has already made its way into secondary schools, can be appropriated, but the meanings of the tier system need to be redefined. I also will suggest ways in which content area teachers will need to make significant changes in how they instruct and assess students within the parameters of their disciplines.

Why Is Tier 1 Literacy Instruction Necessary?

The foundation of RTI is the tier system. Tier 1 has been defined as regular classroom instruction. In secondary schools, this means the content area classes of English, social studies, science, math, and so on. Measures of secondary reading achievement indicate that students leave high school without being able to

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read at a level that prepares them for college.

In 2009, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011) reading test was given to a representative sample of 12th graders across the country. Results indicated that 38% of students scored at the proficient level and 74% scored at or above the basic level. In another measure, the 2011 ACT report of College and Career Readiness, only 25% of the students tested met the benchmark requirement of college readiness in all four subjects (reading, English, mathematics, and science). The benchmark score is considered a minimum score to predict a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher or a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher in the course (ACT, 2011). Clearly, students are not leaving high school with a strong ability to read.

It's important to consider the reasons why adolescents have difficulty reading. Middle level and high school students typically do not have reading instruction after sixth grade (Alexander & Fox, 2011). The common thought was that students could "learn to read" in elementary grades and that a strong focus on reading in the primary grades would "inoculate" students from future reading problems.

It was also thought that secondary school was a time to "read to learn," or to use reading in content areas. The problem with this scenario is that texts change considerably as students move through secondary grades and students who are good readers in elementary schools may not be proficient readers as they progress through the grades (see NAEP, 2011). Although policy makers hoped that an emphasis on primary reading would bleed into intermediate and secondary grades, it has not happened (Snow & Moje, 2010).

There are other reasons why adolescents have difficulty reading. The literacy demands of texts change through the grades and become significantly longer and more complex. Texts contain more graphic representations. Students also are expected to read a wider variety of texts, including journal and magazine articles, newspaper articles, primary documents, and

digital media in addition to books (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010).

Students find these texts challenging because they lack vocabulary knowledge, general knowledge about the topic, and familiarity of text structures. Moreover, students may not have the kinds of comprehension and monitoring strategies to help them understand what they are reading (Lee & Spratley, 2010).

What Tier 1 Instruction Should Look Like

Content area teachers are responsible for Tier 1 instruction, or classroom-level instruction. For content area teachers to make an impact on students' literacy achievement, they need to focus on instructing students on ways to become readers in their specific discipline.

According to Langer (2011), "subject-area teachers, who are disciplinary experts, need to guide, model, and provide opportunities for students to try out and step into the ways of thinking that are appropriate to that discipline" (p. 14). As teachers invite students to become learners in academic disciplines, they need to provide discipline-specific strategy instruction, increased opportunities to read, differentiated reading materials, and literacy assessment.

Discipline-Specific Strategy Instruction

Teachers like Alan, who was introduced at the beginning of this commentary, need to focus on literacy in their discipline rather than teaching general reading skills. Adolescent literacy educators have been concerned for decades over the resistance of content area teachers to teach reading strategies in their classrooms (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). Because of this sustained resistance, adolescent literacy researchers changed directions and began to look at how disciplinary experts used literacy.

Shanahan, Shanahan, and Misischia (2006) were among the first to research the idea that we need to look at how experts in the fields use literacy and apply it to content area classrooms. Then, Moje (2008) wrote a stirring commentary suggesting that adolescent literacy experts build disciplinary literacy instruction programs rather than teach generic strategies.

Maniates and Pearson (2008) echoed this perspective by pointing out that general reading strategies were not necessarily useful because of the wide range of differences between purposes for reading in the different content areas.

Researchers began identifying how literacy is used in the disciplines. Lee and Spratley (2010) suggested that there are several reading and thinking strategies that are used across the disciplines, such as building prior knowledge; building specialized vocabulary; learning to deconstruct complex sentences; using knowledge of text structures and genres; mapping graphic (and mathematical) representations against explanations in the text; posing discipline relevant questions; comparing claims and propositions across texts; and evaluating claims.

Even though these strategies are used in all of the disciplines, they are used differently. The focus of English teachers is on teaching students how to use literary devices to interpret complex fictional texts; mathematics teachers show students how to read texts with precision; science teachers demonstrate how to transform information from one form to another; and history teachers should show how to evaluate sources and analyze evidence.

For content area teachers to focus on disciplinary literacy, they need to first have a clear understanding how texts are used as tools for learning and specifically demonstrate how to use literacy for their own purposes. For example, I observed a math class in which the teacher was explaining how to read a word problem. He said, "Read the problem slowly looking for the precise meaning of each of the groups of words." He went on to say, "In math, you need to read slowly to be able to understand the meanings of each group of words."

In the case of this mathematics problem, the teacher was teaching students how to use literacy by reading slowly and looking for precise meanings. He knew that mathematicians needed to use literacy in that way and was demonstrating for students how literacy is used in mathematics.

Increase Opportunities to Read Content Area Texts

For Tier 1 instruction to be effective, teachers need to make sure that they provide students with an overabundance of opportunities to read content area texts. Research indicates that students read very little in secondary school (Fisher, 2004). It is obvious that students need opportunities to *individually* "struggle through text" and apply the disciplinary literacy strategies that teachers demonstrate.

There are many reasons having opportunities to read is important, among them that reading can increase prior knowledge, which in turn can increase comprehension (Dole, Valencia, Greer, & Wardrop, 1991). Teachers, however, are wary of asking students to read texts because so many of their students are unable to read at grade level.

Differentiate Reading Materials

One of the barriers to increasing opportunities to read is that most secondary classrooms contain students who range in reading levels, some as low as primary grades. When selecting texts for students to read, Graesser, McNamara, and Kulikowich (2011) suggest that teachers assign the following types of materials:

- Challenging texts with associated explanations
- Texts at the zone of proximal development
- Easy texts to build self-efficacy
- A balanced diet of texts at varying difficulty
- Texts tailored to develop particular reading components (p. 232)

The common core standards have the goal of students reading at or near grade level (Common Core Standards, 2010). That may not be possible for some adolescent readers. Teachers, therefore, should differentiate reading materials whenever possible.

Some teachers assign paired texts that use the same topic and different reading levels. For example, an English teacher who was teaching Shakespeare's (1985) *Romeo and Juliet* assigned the Shakespeare Made Easy version, which contains the original language next to a modern version. Students who had difficult

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reading the original play were given the option of reading the easier version.

Assess Literacy Progress

Most RTI frameworks have a screening measure to determine whether students need Tier 2 instruction. Some secondary schools use standards-based tests for this purpose. According to Morsy, Keiffer, and Snow (2010), these tests are not appropriate: "although they may be able to tell educators *who* struggles with reading, they cannot provide insight into *why* these students struggle" (p. 2). Therefore, screening tests might give educators a list of students for Tier 2 instruction, but they do not provide the kinds of information that are needed for Tier 2 interventions.

Literacy assessment has not typically been part of content area teachers' responsibility. Instead, secondary schools that document literacy progress tend to use external programs, such as EasyCBM and AimsWeb. These assessments give vocabulary, comprehension, or fluency measures, but they do not give the same kinds of authentic assessment measures that content area teachers can provide.

I suggest that for Tier 1 instruction to be truly effective, content area teachers should have input into the process of identifying students for Tier 2 intervention. As described previously, each academic discipline uses literacy differently. Some students may be having trouble reading science texts but may be excellent at reading literature. Therefore, content area teachers should document which students are having difficulty reading content area texts as one piece of data to determine which students need Tier 2 intervention.

Content area teachers do not typically assess literacy progress. However, teachers can list the names of students who teachers suspect are having difficulty reading grade-appropriate texts. This is not the same as a list of students who are failing the class. A student might be doing well in class but not be able to read the text. Teachers can then prepare a Cloze or Maze test or give a reading guide to give to individual students to determine whether they are able to read specific content area material.

I recommend that content area teachers record students' reading progress periodically and provide literacy committee/administrators a list of those students who are unable to read grade-appropriate texts. Students who are documented reading below their grade level, or who are below level in more than one class, need a closer look by a literacy coach.

Tier 2: Literacy Intervention

Although most content area teachers will not be involved with Tier 2 instruction, it is helpful for them to know the difference between their responsibility as Tier 1 teachers and that of Tier 2 teachers. Some content area teachers, especially those with training in reading, may teach a Tier 2 class, so a brief explanation will be given here.

There are three types of Tier 2 intervention frameworks used in secondary schools: classes using a purchased program, instruction that addresses individual reading needs, and strategy instruction (Johnson, Smith, & Harris, 2009). Some schools have instituted general reading classes for all students who enter high school with low reading scores. There are several problems with this approach. These reading classes are often focused on general reading strategies and vocabulary development. However, placing students with different reading needs in the same intervention has little chance of improving students' achievement (Morsy, Keiffer, & Snow, 2010) and may even make literacy problems worse (Alexander & Fox, 2011).

Strategy Instruction as Intervention

Research on strategy instruction, however, is robust. There is strong evidence that teaching students specific vocabulary and comprehension strategies produces achievement (Kamil et al., 2008). In a synthesis of intervention studies conducted between 1994 and 2004 with students in grades 6 through 12, researchers found very strong evidence for comprehension and strategy instruction (Edmonds et al., 2009).

If intervention classes are focused on strategy instruction, Conley (2008) argued that strategy instruction in isolation without a direct application to specific disciplines will not meet students' needs. I agree. More than two decades ago, I experimented

with co-listing strategy instruction with content area classes (Davis, 1990). In that article, I described a study in which I connected directly with science and social studies teachers to teach specific reading and study strategies that applied to the disciplines.

I taught reading strategies using the texts and topics given to me by the content area teachers. I taught students how to use text features, about text structures, how to make inferences, how to take notes, and about strategies for remembering information and applying them to larger contexts. All of the students improved their study strategies and classroom grades. This is the type of intervention we need to offer in Tier 2 intervention classes.

Role of Content Area Teachers

The difficulty with embedding content texts and topics in an intervention class is that teachers of these classes may not know discipline-specific strategies. Content area teachers will need to communicate with Tier 2 teachers or instructional assistants about the topics they will be teaching and their learning expectations.

For example, if a teaching goal of a history teacher is for students to write an essay on how the Cold War shaped United States' policy after World War II, the literacy teacher could provide texts about the Cold War that would be taught and help students identify causes and effects. Students would also need to learn how to synthesize information from several sources and develop an argument using evidence from the texts.

These kinds of literacy strategies would help students learn both the content that they need to learn and how to appropriate that content through literacy. Content area teachers, however, need to be willing to share information about their teaching with literacy instructors.

More Than Going Through the Motions

The RTI framework has made sweeping changes in elementary schools and in the language of teachers. The RTI process used by elementary schools—the three-tier framework, universal screening, progress monitoring, and summative assessment—is being implemented in secondary schools. Along with the focus on disciplinary literacy, the RTI framework could have significant influence on how content area teachers approach teaching.

If we want students to read deeply and critically in the disciplines, it is essential that content area teachers begin to ask this question: "Which students in my class can read grade-appropriate material?" Content area teachers should be the ones who provide disciplinary literacy instruction in their classrooms and also develop a method for evaluating which students can successfully read. If content area teachers are willing to take up the challenge, they could make a difference in the lives of generations of students.

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