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Published Abstract

Learning to read—amazing as it is to small children and their parents—is one thing. Reading to learn is quite another. Are today’s students able to use reading and writing to acquire knowledge, solve problems, and make decisions in academic, personal, and professional arenas? Do they have the literacy skills necessary to meet the demands of the twenty-first century? To answer these questions, this article describes the increasingly complex comprehension, reasoning skills, and knowledge that students need as they progress through school and surveys what researchers and educators know about how to teach those skills.

Successfully reading to learn requires the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information from multiple sources. Effective readers must be able to apply different knowledge, reading, and reasoning processes to different types of content, from fiction to history and science, to news accounts and user manuals. They must assess sources of information for relevance, reliability, impartiality, and completeness. And they must connect information across multiple sources. In short, successful readers must not only use general reading skills but also pay close attention to discipline-specific content, reasoning, and knowledge-production processes.

The evidence on three different instructional approaches to reading to learn is reviewed. The most long-standing approach is to teach general comprehension strategies, for example, paying attention to features that summarize the important ideas in the text, or connecting pieces of information within the text. A second approach uses classroom discussion to explore and develop ideas introduced in texts. The third approach, disciplinary content instruction, uses problems and questions typical of a particular academic discipline to engage students in literacy practices specific to the discipline.

Building the literacy skills necessary for U.S. students to read comprehensively and critically and to learn content in a variety of disciplines should be a primary responsibility for all of the nation’s teachers. But outside of English, few subject-area teachers are aware of the need to teach subject-area reading comprehension skills, nor have they had opportunities to learn them themselves. Building the capacity of all teachers to meet the literacy needs of today’s students requires long-term investment and commitment from the education community as well as society as a whole.

Implications

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) reflect the increased literacy demands of the 21st century. Adequate preparation of students to meet these standards requires adopting discipline-specific approaches to reading, writing, speaking, and listening rather than generic approaches. Discipline-specific pedagogy requires that teachers deepen their understanding of the literacy demands and practices of the content domains that they teach so that they can provide appropriate pedagogical support to their students.

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