

The Case for Authentic Tasks in Content Literacy

Seth A. Parsons, Allison E. Ward

Motivation, academic vocabulary, and the role of teachers have been themes of previous Content Literacy columns. In this installment, we suggest that the tasks, or assignments, students complete are an important aspect of content literacy because they influence students' understandings of content and reading. Additionally, we demonstrate how well-designed tasks are closely associated with increasing student engagement and expanding word knowledge.

Academic Tasks

Research and theory position the task students complete as the fundamental component of classroom instruction (Blumenfeld, Mergendoller, & Swarthout, 1987; Turner, 1995). Doyle (1983) demonstrated that students learn what a task leads them to do. This perspective aligns with theories of constructivism, which posit that students actively construct knowledge (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). The resulting implication for instruction is that students should be active participants in academic work (Dewey, 1938). In short, if research and theory suggest that students learn what they participate in and if the assignment determines their level of participation, then critical consideration should be given to the tasks students are assigned.

Tasks are particularly germane to content literacy because the assignments students complete in content areas determine their understandings of content area reading (Blumenfeld et al., 1987; Doyle, 1983; Miller, 2003; Perry, Turner, & Meyer, 2006). For example, if students spend most of their social studies instructional time reading assigned textbook chapters

in order to complete fact-based worksheets, they are likely to conclude that social studies is useful only for locating facts and that the purpose of reading is to answer questions. If, on the other hand, students read social studies material to address real problems and relate history and citizenship to everyday life, they are more likely to conclude that reading and social studies are worth expending the required effort.

Skill and strategy instruction is a vital component of content literacy, but content literacy is more than just skills and strategies. We also need to teach students why content reading is important and relevant. Well-designed tasks both explicitly teach students the skills and strategies for comprehending text *and* give students experiences that show them content literacy is a worthwhile pursuit.

Authentic Tasks

Designing and implementing authentic tasks is a way to provide students with experiences that help them see relevance in the academic work they are completing and thus build productive understandings of what content literacy is and why it is useful. The importance of relevant and authentic learning tasks is noted by Pearson, Raphael, Benson, and Madda (2007):

The argument underlying the promotion of authenticity is that too many school tasks are unauthentic, unrealistic, and, by implication, not useful for engaging in real-world literacy activities; that is, instead of teaching kids how to “do school,” we should be teaching them how to “do life.” (p. 36)

Although tasks have the primary function of helping students understand how content and reading

can be useful in their lives, authentic tasks have the added benefit of enhancing students' motivation and building academic vocabularies. Additional resources for designing and implementing authentic tasks are listed in Table 1.

Authentic Tasks and Motivation

Research has demonstrated that authentic tasks enhance students' motivation. Authentic tasks mimic the activities people complete in settings outside of school (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). Therefore, authentic activities contextualize students' learning, which promotes motivation and strategic behavior (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). For example, Turner (1995) studied the assignments that promoted motivation in primary students and distinguished between open and closed tasks. Open tasks were student directed, and students framed the problem and designed a solution. Closed tasks were teacher directed, and students worked toward one solution or "right" answer. Open tasks were associated with higher cognitive processes and metacognition, leading to the conclusion, "the task itself was instrumental in facilitating motivation" (p. 431).

Similarly, Miller and Meece (1999) studied what they called high-challenge tasks. They defined high-challenge tasks as assignments that last for more than one day and include collaboration and

multiparagraph writing. One researcher worked with third-grade teachers to design high-challenge assignments. Classrooms were rated as high- or low-implementation. In high-implementation classrooms, all students demonstrated more motivation. Miller and Meece also found that students in both low- and high-implementation classrooms preferred high-challenge tasks to low-challenge tasks.

In Figure 1, the tasks in Classroom A were motivating, and students were collaborating and making choices within authentic activity. Throughout the unit of study, students were reading and writing extended text and were motivated to do so because the literacy activities were embedded within meaningful science experiences. In Classroom B, students were working individually to complete school-based activities; they had little input into the assignments and had few opportunities to think critically. In short, students in Classroom B were "doing school." Authentic tasks, then, encourage student motivation, which is vital to expanding content literacy (Brozo & Flynt, 2008).

Authentic Tasks and Academic Vocabulary

Authentic tasks can also build students' academic vocabularies. Because school success revolves around the use of academic language (Gee, 2008), it is important to develop awareness and understanding of academic terminology. Academic vocabulary is best

Table 1
Resources for Designing and Implementing Authentic Instruction

- Darling-Hammond, L. (Ed.). (2008). *Powerful learning: What we know about teaching for understanding*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Duke, N.K., Purcell-Gates, V., Hall, L.A., & Tower, C. (2006). Authentic literacy activities for developing comprehension and writing. *The Reading Teacher*, 60(4), 344–355.
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Figure 1
Content Instruction in Two Classrooms

Classroom A

In this third-grade classroom, students engage in a study of living organisms and the environment. The students are assigned the task of creating a description of the organisms and environment within their local community to share with other classes. To accomplish this assignment, students read various texts on organisms and environments with the direction and support of the teacher. Next, students keep a field notebook to record detailed observations of the organisms and environments surrounding their school and homes. With their observations recorded, students work in groups to create descriptions of the organisms and the community environment. Groups then share their descriptions in the form of a pamphlet, PowerPoint presentation, or a podcast.

Classroom B

In another third-grade class, the teacher is covering the same content objectives: living organisms and the environment. Students in this class begin by reading a section of their textbook on the subject and completing the questions at the end of the chapter. In subsequent lessons, the students copy the teacher's notes from the overhead, paste prepared handouts into their science composition books, and review a study guide to prepare them for the upcoming test on the objectives.

understood when meaning is created through experience (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Gee, 2004). As such, teachers can help students create meaning through authentic tasks that encourage content understanding because students are using the academic language in tangible experiences.

Similarly, authentic tasks invite peer collaboration, thereby incorporating academic vocabulary into conversation and peer-supported explanation (Cazden, 2001; French, 2004; Morrow, 2002). In fact, authentic assignments encourage a variety of oral language experiences, including teacher-generated questioning practices, explicit instruction, and large- and small-group discussions—all of which support academic vocabulary development.

In Classroom A, for example, students recorded field observations, requiring the application of newly learned vocabulary both to discuss the process of using a field notebook and to describe their observations. Later, students worked in groups to summarize and compile their data, again using academic language to discuss the group processes and to present their findings. The teacher engaged the student groups in conversation and provided support to encourage academic language use in oral and written forms.

In Classroom B, students had few chances to use the new academic vocabulary associated with the content. Although they copied the definitions, they had no reason or opportunity to incorporate the new vocabulary into their language use. As these two contrasting scenarios demonstrate, authentic tasks

provide more opportunities for students to enhance their academic vocabularies because they use academic language in meaningful experiences (Guthrie & Ozgungor, 2002).

The Important Role of the Teacher in Authentic Tasks

We have made the case that authentic tasks are important for students' content literacy learning because they (a) send the message that content and literacy are important and relevant to their lives, (b) enhance students' motivation, and (c) build their academic vocabularies. The effectiveness of tasks, however, depends on the teacher. Designing authentic tasks that integrate content and literacy objectives is more difficult than traditional content instruction that relies on textbooks or lectures (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Authentic tasks take substantial thought and planning to design and implement.

In Classroom A, for example, the teacher had to (a) obtain a variety of appropriately leveled texts on organisms and the environment, (b) provide explicit instruction on the content and the procedures included in the unit (e.g., how to take observational field notes), (c) plan support and scaffolding to differentiate for the various learners in the classroom, (d) gather the resources students needed to complete the task, and (e) teach and use the academic language associated with the content.

Moreover, authentic tasks are more fluid than traditional academic work (Blumenfeld et al., 1987; Doyle, 1983), in that multiple activities are likely to occur simultaneously and students are likely to require scaffolding. Therefore, authentic tasks require the teacher to be *thoughtfully adaptive* (Fairbanks et al., 2010). That is, in the midst of teaching, the teacher must constantly monitor student progress and provide support and instruction as needed. While this monitoring and scaffolding is a standard component of effective instruction (e.g., International Reading Association, 2003), the open, interactive nature of authentic tasks makes this aspect of teaching even more challenging.

Conclusion

Authentic tasks are an important aspect of content literacy instruction because they help students understand that content literacy is worthwhile and meaningful to their lives. Authentic tasks also enhance students' motivation and build academic vocabularies. However, authentic tasks require substantial time and thought from the teacher. We feel the greater demands that come with designing and implementing authentic tasks are worthwhile because they will likely lead to higher student engagement and meaningful learning.

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Parsons teaches at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA; e-mail sparson5@gmu.edu. Ward also teaches at George Mason University; e-mail award12@gmu.edu.

The department editor welcomes reader comments. William G. Brozo teaches at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA; e-mail wbrozo@gmu.edu.

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