Research Connections

Linking Research to Practice in Disciplinary Instruction

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This issue of Research Connections highlights the ways Doug Buehl links research with practice. Doug has been an active literacy professional at the local, state, and national levels for 30 years. During this time, he was a social studies teacher and reading specialist/literacy coach at Madison (WI) East High School and a district adolescent literacy support teacher. His publications include the International Reading Association (IRA) bestseller, Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning (3rd ed.). Doug was a founding member of IRA’s Commission on Adolescent Literacy, served as President of IRA’s Secondary Reading Interest Group, and in 1996 received IRA’s Nila Banton Smith Award, which honors a secondary school teacher who has shown leadership in translating theory and research into content area literacy practice.

DWM: How do you see research best contributing to practice?

DB: On one hand, teachers of adolescents are often skeptical of educational research because they suspect that much of it does not acknowledge the complexities of their classrooms. But on the other hand, these very complexities lead teachers to seek practices that more effectively support their students’ learning. So I see research often providing a layer of reassurance for teachers to experiment with changes and venture into instruction that may be outside their comfort zones.

DWM: How do you use research?

DB: Much of what I do involves engaging teachers in reconceptualizing what it means to teach a subject while factoring in the literacy challenges of that academic discipline. Laying the groundwork of supporting research when advocating literacy practices is essential.

Our curriculums tend to deliver huge doses of what students should know and be able to do without sufficiently considering why students should develop certain understandings, why they should become increasingly accomplished in some ways, or how experts within a discipline read, write, and think. Likewise, I have found that literacy staff development can easily over-emphasize what practices are research based without sufficiently considering why they are appropriate for certain situations, why teachers should develop expertise in them, or how such practices can be integrated into content instruction. Merely asserting that a literacy practice is research-based is insufficient, so I work to provide insights into the nature of the supporting research as well.
Teachers often state a preference for pragmatic workshops that focus on practical teaching ideas. But unless teachers are accorded a clear research-based rationale for classroom strategies, I fear that their instruction may not extend beyond surface procedures, and they will miss opportunities to have deep impacts on students’ learning. In addition, teachers want to know that recommended literacy practices are based on more than mere opinion, so I show that such practices are supported by the best systematic knowledge available on effective teaching and learning.

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Research can justify a constellation of literacy practices that guides instruction toward the development of readers and writers in academic disciplines. For example, the research on questioning in comprehension, in terms of the questions asked of students as well as the questions students generate themselves, makes a case for a series of well-known applications: K-W-L, Question–Answer Relationships, Questioning the Author, Reciprocal Teaching, and Socratic questioning. As a result, the instructional emphasis becomes one of mentoring students to adopt an inquiring mindset to their reading and to pose their own questions of authors and texts.

DWM: What sources of research do you find especially valuable?

DB: Syntheses of research literature that point toward certain classroom practices (and perhaps away from others) are particularly helpful. Scholarly analyses of the range of research regarding some facet of literacy provide us practitioners with a solid basis for translating what these findings might mean for teaching and learning in our classrooms.

I have found professional networks to be the best pipelines for discovering significant research. My involvements in both IRA and its state-level affiliate, the Wisconsin State Reading Association, have continuously put me in touch with the evolving research landscape. Foremost among these networks are professional conferences and meetings where those of us interested in adolescent literacy share practices as well as recommendations for research. I have found presentations by scholars at national and state IRA conventions to be can’t-miss opportunities, especially because informed voices in the field can point out shortcuts toward indispensable findings. Published research syntheses such as the several editions of the Handbook of Reading Research and What Research Has To Say About Reading Instruction as well as volumes targeted for adolescent literacy such as those found at IRA’s Focus on Adolescent Literacy website (www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus_adolescent.html) are essential resources.

DWM: What line of research have you found to be especially productive?

DB: For over two decades I have been tracking the research on comprehension strategy instruction, since that remarkable surge of findings from the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois. I have been particularly interested in how such research can guide literacy practices in content classrooms. A fatalistic attitude toward the reading comprehension of students—a resignation that some students will comprehend a text and some inevitably will not—is seductive. The conviction that teachers can exert considerable influence over all students’ comprehension ultimately is very empowering. When I share research that shows comprehension strategy instruction having a substantial impact, I build a compelling case for integrating literacy practices into the flow of content instruction.

Disaggregating facets of comprehension that benefit from explicit emphases is especially beneficial. Scholars such as P. David Pearson, Michael Pressley, and their colleagues have described proficient reading behaviors, strategic thinking that can be teased into the open and talked about. Instructional strategies can prompt and support such behaviors. For example, I have found the work of Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and their associates (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997) to be a powerful vehicle for reworking classroom questioning so that questions begin to mirror ones students can ask themselves. As teachers model fundamental queries like “What does
The next phase of the research seems to be identifying discipline-specific questioning protocols. For example, what are the questions historians raise when reading texts typical of the discipline of history? Shanahan and Shanahan’s (2008) recent work with disciplinary literacy seems to be an especially promising direction for fleshing out how an effective generic classroom strategy like Questioning the Author can be extended and refined to mentor students into thinking like experts within academic disciplines. One such example is the Thinking Like a Historian project in Wisconsin, which is a joint venture of the Wisconsin Historical Society, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater History Department, and the Wisconsin Cooperative Educational Service Agency #2 (www.wisconsinhistory.org/ThinkingLikeaHistorian/). History teachers are encouraged to focus questioning around the following five core themes:

1. Cause and effect (“What happened and why?”)
2. Change and continuity (“What changed and what remained the same?”)
3. Turning points (“How did events of the past effect the future?”)
4. Through their eyes (“How did people in the past view their lives and world?”)
5. Using the past (“How does studying the past help us understand our lives and world?”)

A common frustration of middle and high school teachers is the perception that many of the literacy practices they encounter in staff development workshops are designed for texts that are not central to learning the disciplines they teach. When comprehension instruction is conceptualized as assuming somewhat different forms depending on the specific academic discipline, content teachers began to see a convergence between literacy practices and the essence of teaching their subject. Continued research on discipline-specific literacy practices seems to be an especially fertile ground for determining how to mentor students to read, write, and think through the lens of a mathematician, biologist, musician, historian, artist, novelist, and so forth.

DWM: How do you promote students’ and teachers’ own research–practice connections?

DB: Developing an action–research mentality through classroom debriefings is a good way to promote independent research–practice connections. For instance, I show how to incorporate metacognitive conversations as Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz (1999) have described into regular debriefings, or deliberations, about learning course contents. If students are to become increasingly independent readers and learners, then they need to inquire into and talk about how they are thinking as well as what they are thinking.

I also make sure that teachers have similar debriefing opportunities as an essential component of literacy workshops. I center discussions on how the use of specific literacy practices might help—and have helped—mentor students into becoming more accomplished learners within a discipline. I ask teachers to continuously examine how a strategy might assist students in becoming not only more knowledgeable but also insightful in what it means to be literate in different academic contexts.

References


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