

In Praise of Amateurism: A Friendly Critique of Moje's "Call for Change" in Secondary Literacy

Secondary teachers should be encouraged to teach the vocabulary of their content areas, to show students how to comprehend texts, and to regard writing as an important tool for learning. Disciplinary literacy instruction, however, should be left to higher education.

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In the October 2008 issue of the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Elizabeth Birr Moje issued a challenge to the field of secondary literacy to rethink its relationship to the academic content areas. These are exciting times, she noted. Recently, adolescent literacy has been featured in a variety of high-profile reports, research studies, and policy statements. Numerous states and districts have launched ambitious new secondary reading initiatives. Countless middle and high schools have put literacy assessments in place, hired literacy coaches, and implemented new reading programs and interventions. Even Congress has gotten into the act, funding the Striving Readers program (and, as I write these words, considering a major expansion of federal supports for secondary reading and writing).

But in an important sense, Moje cautioned, the field has not matured at all. While researchers and reformers have done a great deal to promote effective and engaging instruction in decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, they remain somewhat deaf to the differing kinds of reading and writing that go on in school. Even in articles, workshops, and textbooks that purport to address literacy in the content areas, experts tend to offer blanket recommendations on the use of generic comprehension strategies, as though such strategies were all-purpose skills that could be applied equally well to all sorts of texts in every content area.

That is an awfully dated view of reading and writing, argued Moje. In the broader fields of linguistics and literacy studies, most scholars gave up long ago on the idea that people can become skillful readers or good writers in general. Perhaps such a notion can be defended in early literacy instruction, where students must develop what might be described as all-purpose skills, such as decoding and reading with fluency. But it becomes impossible to make generalizations about skilled reading and good writing in the secondary years, once the curriculum branches out into the content areas and students begin reading and writing all sorts of texts on their own, outside of school.

According to Moje (2008), it is high time for adolescent literacy researchers to reach out to teachers of academic content areas, helping them to identify the literacy demands specific to their own disciplines and to integrate reading and writing into their own teaching. "I suggest," she added, "that it may be most

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productive to build *disciplinary literacy* instructional programs, rather than to merely encourage content teachers to employ literacy teaching practices and strategies” (p. 96). That is where Moje loses me.

Clearly, she is right to argue that literacy should be viewed as “an essential aspect of disciplinary learning” (Moje, 2008, p. 99). And if she were discussing a part of the educational system in which the curriculum is, in fact, unquestion-

ably disciplinary in nature—law school, for example, or other graduate-level programs—then she would be right to argue for greater emphasis on disciplinary literacy instruction. In fact, that is the trend today in college-level writing instruction. Many writing centers that used to provide generic writing instruction, serving all parts of the campus, are being converted into Writing in the Disciplines programs (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Wardle, 2009).

I would not, however, be so quick to assume that disciplinary practice is what goes on—or should go on—in secondary schools. Rather, it strikes me that there are useful distinctions to be made between the middle and high school content areas and the academic disciplines (which, after all, have their roots in the modern university).

Content Areas and Disciplines: Close Siblings or Distant Relatives?

In much of her commentary, Moje (2008) used the terms *discipline* and *subject area* (and occasionally *content area*) interchangeably, referring to math, history, English, and the sciences sometimes by one name and sometimes by the other “depending on the scholar and the time period” (p. 97) under discussion.

On a few occasions, though, she made a subtle, and telling, distinction between the two. For instance, after citing Cuban’s (1986) well-known research into the glacial pace with which K–12 classroom instruction has changed over the past century, she referred to “subject areas *drawn from* the disciplines,” and later on the same page, she mentioned “the disciplines that *undergird* those subjects” and “the disciplines from

which subject areas *are derived*” (Moje, 2008, p. 99; my emphases).

Moje nodded toward a historical perspective to show how difficult it will be to implement the model of disciplinary literacy instruction that she advocated. Over many decades, she pointed out, the secondary subject areas have developed into something like institutional subcultures (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995; Siskin, 1991), which are not easily or quickly changed, especially by outsiders such as literacy specialists. Far better, she argued, to promote reading and writing instruction from within those subcultures so that their members adopt them as their own.

A historical perspective, however, does not only show how hard it is to change the individual subcultures that exist inside schools. It also reveals that secondary educators have had a long, complicated, and often contentious relationship with their college-level counterparts (e.g., Angus & Mirel, 1999; Boyer, 1983; Cuban, 1999; Kliebard, 2004). From the 1893 *Committee of Ten* report to 1918’s *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* to 1983’s *A Nation at Risk* to current debates over what it means to be college- and career-ready, secondary and postsecondary education reformers have never ceased to argue over the purposes, content, depth, and breadth of academic study in the middle and high schools, particularly insofar as those things relate to college entrance standards.

Simply put, the secondary content areas never have had a clear and settled relationship to the postsecondary disciplines. (Nor, for that matter, have the college majors had a clear and settled relationship to graduate-level disciplinary studies.) Whatever we understand the terms *subject area* and *discipline* to mean, we should think twice before conflating them (Deng & Luke, 2008).

In that case, would it make better sense, as Moje implied, to describe middle and high school math, science, history, and English as being *derived* from, *drawn* from, or *undergirded* by the disciplines? If not equivalent to their namesakes over on the college campus, do not the secondary schools’ departmental subcultures bear reasonably close family resemblances, at least, to the disciplinary subcultures of higher education? When it comes to the departments that I know best—

secondary English and college English—I would have to say no, not really.

Certainly, secondary English and college English do have some things in common, such as an interest in textual analysis and an inclination to assign students to read certain British and U.S. authors (e.g., Chaucer, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Fitzgerald). But if we consider the full range of things typically associated with academic disciplines (e.g., shared theoretical paradigms, critical techniques, modes of inquiry, research agendas, organizational roles and responsibilities, professional standards, reward systems, and procedures by which to negotiate all of those things), then secondary English and college English look to be very distant cousins at best, having many more differences than similarities.

Further, even if we choose to define academic disciplines in the most superficial way (i.e., bracketing off most of the intellectual, professional, and institutional features of disciplinary life and understanding a *discipline* to be nothing more than a group of people teaching more or less the same curricular content), then secondary and postsecondary English still do not look to be closely related.

For example, consider the English classes available in the 2009 fall semester to first-year students at the University of California, Berkeley (english.berkeley.edu/courses/semester.php?semester=fall&year=2009), which I chose simply because it claimed the top spot in *U.S. News & World Report's* 2009 rankings of graduate English programs (i.e., one can assume that the department plays an influential role in the current disciplinary formation of English).

Berkeley undergraduates can take a seminar on *Hamlet*, where they will be invited to “consider questions of interpretation, motivation, staging, and poetics,” which sound more or less like the sorts of things one might expect to discuss in a high school classroom. Then again, students can sign up for Animal Rights and Disability Studies, in which they will explore “work done in gender and women’s studies, critical race studies, disability studies, and thinking on animal rights.” Or they could take California and Ethnicity—Fiction and Film, where they will “read and view a group of narratives...that delineates the California experience across ethnicity, race, gender,

and class.” Or perhaps they will opt for Mid-19th Through the 20th Century, which offers a “general survey of imaginative responses to the not always positive progress of modernity,” with an emphasis on “works produced by an array of prominent figures and representatives of some of the principal Modernist and Postmodern movements, and/or events.”

Mind you, those are the first-year courses. Upper-level English majors can move on to classes such as Dystopian Fiction and the Fate of the Body, which “often radically redefines the body, both euphorically imagining its future and registering anxieties about the decline of more traditional bodily forms.” Or they can take the research seminar on Visuality, Textuality, and Modernity, which will “examine the deployment of words and images in composite photo-texts, the evocation of imaginary photographs in autobiographical fictions, and the textuality of photographic albums, archives, and narratives.”

Can the United States’ secondary English teachers really be said to belong to the same subculture (many competing and constantly evolving subcultures, actually) that produced such course descriptions? According to the existing, if limited, research into what actually goes on in middle and high school English classes (Applebee & Langer, 2006; Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2009; Gamoran & Carbonaro, 2002), most teachers focus almost exclusively on poetry, drama, and fiction; they tend to assign a fairly narrow range of traditional, canonical texts; they tend to encourage very little open-ended classroom discussion; they tend to assign very little independent writing; they neither read nor assign students to read literary criticism; they hardly ever read, discuss, or publish in scholarly journals; and they rarely participate in scholarly debates about key issues in the field. If secondary English has anything resembling a disciplinary bent, it is a vague allegiance to the New Criticism, with its emphasis on the “close reading” of canonical British and U.S. literary texts, that was in vogue among college English professors 50 or more years ago.

Moreover, it is not clear that today’s undergraduate- and graduate-level English faculty themselves belong to a coherent discipline, much less one that undergirds the secondary school content area of the same name. For decades already, university English professors have

struggled in vain to come up with a persuasive case as to why their various factions all should continue to share the same departmental letterhead, given that they can no longer agree on research methods, interests, professional standards, or reading lists (Graff, 1989; Halberstam, 2005; Scholes, 1998).

Between Generic and Disciplinary Literacy Instruction: A Third Way

English may be and probably is a special case, given that it has been a terribly fractured discipline since its creation a century ago, when literary analysis, literary history, philology, speech communication, and the teaching of creative, academic, and technical writing were all bound together in an uneasy relationship (Goggin, 1999; Parker, 1967; Russell, 2002; Winterowd, 1998). However, while I will have to defer to others' judgment on this point, secondary-level mathematics, sciences, and social studies do not appear to be closely aligned with their postsecondary counterparts either (e.g., Abell, 2007; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Deng, 2001).

Moje (2008) seems to agree. In the final section of her commentary, she pointed out a number of "persistent challenges to developing disciplinary literacy practices" (p. 104), including student resistance to such instruction, the lack of institutional support for it, a scarcity of the sorts of professional development that it would require, and—most important—the scarcity and unequal distribution of secondary-level teachers who have the truly solid disciplinary background that they would need to teach in this way (Ball, Lubienski, & Mewborn, 2001; Hill, 2007; Ingersoll & Perda, 2008; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995).

In that case, how should reformers proceed? If we agree that the academic disciplines should teach their own forms of literacy, but if we also agree that few secondary-level teachers are true members of a discipline, then what sorts of literacy instruction should we advocate for the secondary schools?

Moje's (2008) position is that if secondary instruction is not all that disciplinary at present, the goal should be to make it so in the future. Realistically, she acknowledged, the United States' middle and high schools lack the means to accomplish that goal anytime soon. The challenges that lie ahead will be

"enormous," she said, "requiring conceptual changes in our definitions, cultural changes in our practices, and structural changes in the enduring institutions of the secondary school and secondary teacher education" (p. 105). Nonetheless, she ended her commentary on a determined note, urging secondary school reformers to make "a commitment to major conceptual, structural, and cultural changes" (p. 105), even though she could offer no specifics as to how to pursue such changes, how long the work would take, or whether it could succeed.

A better option, I think, would be to back out of this dead end and identify a different, more realistic goal for secondary literacy, one that reformers might actually be able to achieve. That is, rather than trying (and, inevitably, failing) to make secondary reading and writing instruction more like postsecondary literacy instruction, why not ask whether there is something to be *gained* by defining secondary literacy as a category unto itself?

According to Moje's line of reasoning, students should graduate from high school having become competent in the various disciplinary forms of communication that supposedly undergird the content areas. It is worth keeping in mind, though, that college students are not asked to master the literacies of several academic disciplines. Rather, undergraduates are required to choose only one major (or two, at most), and even then, students are not expected to arrive on campus already having been trained in the disciplinary discourse of their chosen field. Why, then, should secondary schools be held to such a standard?

For middle and high school literacy instruction, college-level disciplinary study may be a less appropriate model than the college general education program—the broad, liberal arts curriculum that is supposed to precede the deep study of a particular major. In theory, at least, most colleges treat students as generalists for much of their first two years, providing them with instruction that touches on what Conley (2008) called the "big ideas" of the disciplines but that does not necessarily try to induct students into those disciplines' professional subcultures.

In reality, most college-level general education programs were subverted long ago by the academic departments, who tend to use those courses to identify

potential majors and to filter out students who lack aptitude for the given discipline. Over the last century, college education has been thoroughly dominated by disciplinary culture, values, and incentives (especially, but not exclusively, in research universities; Cuban, 1999). Colleges regularly espouse but rarely deliver on the mission of providing a truly liberal education, ensuring not only that students pursue a major but that they also become more broadly literate, familiar with key content and debates from various parts of the campus and beyond.

If anything, though, secondary schools might be more fertile ground than colleges for general education precisely because they are not so steeped in the disciplinary values of higher education. Whatever it might mean to become “broadly literate” or “well educated”—and admittedly such concepts are fuzzy—the cultivation of such capacities can serve as a sufficient and realistic goal at this level.

Given that secondary teachers have much less allegiance to their departments and disciplines than do college professors, and given that they have much greater allegiance to the teaching mission (over and above the research imperative), they might be convinced more easily that it is their job not only to prepare students for more specialized instruction but also to help them become reasonably well-rounded citizens (Farris, 2009).

Secondary schools might be willing and able to do what colleges have not been willing to try: to provide young people with opportunities to read, write, discuss, and argue about matters of civic, political, and personal importance, and to do so in ordinary, non-technical language, without having to defer to specialists possessed of technical knowledge and jargon.

Secondary school, in short, might be the best place to teach young people to become well-informed amateurs. By the time they graduate from high school, students should be familiar with the biggest of the big ideas from history, literature, biology, and other fields. They should be familiar with the biggest political, cultural, and moral debates of our times. It is not, however, realistic to expect them to develop an expert’s knowledge of or ways of communicating about these things.

In deciding what an adolescent should know and be able to do in the content area of history, say, our point of reference should not be the academic

historian’s ways of reading, interpreting, and arguing about archival materials. We should not ask ourselves how a professional historian thinks and reasons and communicates. Rather, we should ask ourselves what a broadly educated U.S. citizen should know about history and the contentious nature of historical interpretation.

Moje nearly echoed that sentiment in the introduction to her commentary (citing Bain, 2006, and Lee, 2007) when she argued that “knowledge and skill in the subject areas is essential to supporting young people in becoming active participants in a democratic society” (p. 97). But here, as elsewhere, she conflated subject (or content) areas with disciplines, going on to say that “content literacy instruction can help youth gain access to the accepted knowledge of the disciplines, thereby allowing them also to critique and change that knowledge.”

Some readers may accuse me of splitting hairs. After all, does it really matter that Moje used the term *discipline* in a colloquial way, treating it as another word for *subject area*? Rather than harping on that, is it not more important to focus on the real point of her argument, which is to urge her colleagues to stop thinking of reading and writing as generic skills and instead to help subject area teachers to recognize and teach their domain-specific kinds of communication?

To the contrary, I would argue that the distinction between general education and disciplinary specialization is critical, deserving careful attention from scholars of adolescent literacy precisely because they have overlooked it for so long, and so completely, that they no longer see it.

Although it has been relatively quiet for some decades, the border separating liberal from specialized studies has proven to be a critical flashpoint over the centuries, going back at least as far as Aristotle (Neel, 1994). It is one that continues to simmer, creating enormous amounts of tension within the secondary curriculum, but it is not often addressed explicitly, much less resolved, by reformers.

Should the secondary content areas be conceived of as junior versions of the academic disciplines,

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helping students get through the early stages of whatever specialized curriculum they choose to study in college? Or should the secondary content areas be conceived of as having an altogether different mission, teaching content and intellectual habits that may overlap somewhat with the college majors, but teaching them in relatively nonspecialized language, using relatively nonspecialized materials?

If we choose the latter, it does not mean that we have to endorse the teaching of one-size-fits-all models of reading and writing. As Moje argued, secondary-level literacy instruction should not be deaf to the variability of discourses. That is, it should not try to teach generic

reading strategies and an all-purpose writing process, and it should not teach young people that there exists such a thing as “good writing” or “skillful reading,” divorced from any particular context and purpose. Rather, it should aim (as rhetorical education has aimed for 2,500 years) to teach students to read and write and argue in various ways and in various genres, dealing flexibly with the situations in which they find themselves.

Moreover, choosing to teach a general education does not mean that we have to forego the teaching of metadiscursive awareness. As Moje (2008) argued, secondary teachers should make literacy itself a topic for study, “providing opportunities for young people to examine how the norms of knowing, doing, and communicating are constructed” (p. 102) in various content areas and other settings.

In addition to showing students how to write a decent (if amateurish) lab report, for example, the science teacher might raise questions about the lab report as a genre, pointing to ways in which it has changed over time or asking students to consider the ethical implications of scientists’ impersonal style of professional communication. The goal should be to make students aware of how differing discourses function in the world, aware of their differences, and aware of their own ability to shift back and forth among them, both in and out of school.

Note, though, that literacy instruction can address both of these priorities—teaching discursive flexibility and teaching metadiscursive awareness—by assigning students to read, write, discuss, and debate texts that only hint at the kinds of disciplinary language, presentation, and content that are the stuff of college majors and graduate programs.

After all, written materials do not have to be narrowly disciplinary to be complex, rich in content, varied in genre, and worthy of study. In fact, many kinds of texts—magazine articles, popular science essays, letters to the editor, political speeches—are valuable precisely because they are not overly disciplinary, allowing nonspecialists to read, enjoy, and respond to them.

If middle and high school teachers do have a solid disciplinary background, then they should be encouraged to teach advanced placement or international baccalaureate or other college-level courses, or to introduce disciplinary material and forms of communication in regular classes. Moreover, reformers should continue to press for a more equitable distribution of such teachers across schools and districts.

However, it is not reasonable to expect all secondary content area teachers to provide postsecondary literacy instruction. Relatively few middle or high school teachers have anything remotely similar to the disciplinary background, identity, and professional life of the typical college-level instructor. Further, the academic disciplines are themselves too fractious, and too much in flux, to serve as useful models for the secondary content areas.

Few content area teachers have ever been persuaded or prepared to see it as their responsibility to provide highly specialized reading and writing instruction. And the more effort that goes into teaching middle and high school students to read, write, and think like specialists, the less effort will go into teaching them to read, write, and think like broadly educated citizens.

By all means, let us encourage and empower secondary teachers to teach the vocabulary of their content areas, to show students how to comprehend the texts they read in class, and to regard writing as an important tool for learning. Let us encourage all middle and high schools to provide students with regular opportunities to read, write, discuss, and argue about

a wide range of interesting topics and texts in a variety of ways, using ordinary, nondisciplinary language (Graff, 2004; Kuhn, 2008). And let us keep working to define precisely what content and skills young people need to be college and career ready. But let us leave the truly disciplinary literacy instruction for the college majors and the graduate programs.

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