Adolescent Literacy
and Differentiated Instruction

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What is adolescent literacy? Researchers and educators continue to define and debate the definition of adolescent literacy. For many years, the term literacy was applied primarily to elementary students learning to read and write. Recently, however, educators and policy makers have turned their attention to adolescent learners. Research reports and other publications on adolescent literacy provide three different interpretations of the term. Some sources focus only on reading when they refer to adolescent literacy; some, however, broaden the definition of literacy: “Literacy and reading, though related, are neither synonymous nor ambiguous, terms. Typically reading is subsumed by literacy, with the latter term used to refer to reading, writing, and other modes of symbolic communication” (Alverman 2001, 4).

This book supports the expanded description of adolescent literacy offered by The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in its policy research brief on this topic:

Literacy encompasses reading, writing and a variety of social and intellectual practices that call upon the voice as well as the eye and hand. It also
extends to the new media—including non-digitalized multimedia, digitalized multimedia, hypertext or hypermedia. (NCTE 2006, 16)

Adolescent literacy, in the broadest sense, can be defined as the way teenagers make sense of their world. It is how they literally and figuratively use the tools of education combined with what they learn and know from outside the classroom to comprehend and understand the today and, more importantly, the tomorrow of their lives. It includes such diverse yet inclusive skills as being literate in reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and technology. It also includes the facility to learn and be able to explain concepts from various content areas, such as mathematics, social studies, and science.

The aspect that unites all of these apparent divergent literacies is the ability of adolescent learners to be self-directed and reflective about their own learning. Specifically, “A Call for Action: What We Know About Adolescent Literacy and Ways to Support Teachers in Meeting Students’ Needs” (NCTE 2004) encourages teachers to help adolescents view text broadly as print, electronic, and visual media. Students should be encouraged to think critically as they engage with such text and also to examine how and what these texts are saying and implying. Furthermore, this call to action propels teachers to create an environment where students engage in making meaning by analyzing, deconstructing, and reconstructing these texts. Such an environment is a classroom where differentiated instruction is the norm. Differentiated instruction honors every learner’s pursuit of literacy through the teacher’s diagnosing and acting upon the learner’s readiness, interests, and learning style. The teacher creates an inclusive environment through the celebration of diverse avenues to learn content, apply process, produce a product, and grow through assessment.

The Need to Address Adolescent Literacy

Recent reports, such as those from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP 2007) and American College Testing (ACT 2006), have identified what an NCTE report calls an “under-literate class of adolescents” (NCTE 2006). According to recent data, nearly half of high school graduates lack the reading skills needed to pass first-year college courses (ACT 2006), and only 59 percent of
the students tested were deemed ready for college work. However, the overall scores for English showed a slight (2 percent) increase in 2006 over 2004. These results are reported at a time when the growth of a global community demands a more literate workforce. The NAEP assessment program reported mixed results in 2007. Reading scores for eighth graders increased, while scores for twelfth graders showed an overall decline in reading compared to the 1992 scores. The average writing scores for both eighth and twelfth graders increased slightly over 1992. The concern of educators and policy makers is that high school graduates in this country will not be ready to compete in a demanding, rapidly changing world. The concern for adolescent literacy is so great that the International Reading Association identified it as a “hot topic” for both 2007 and 2008. Adolescent learners face many new literacy demands as they move into middle school and high school. In the elementary grades, most reading is of works of fiction. At the middle and secondary levels, students are required to read more challenging texts, including more sophisticated literature and more expository texts, such as textbooks and essays. These texts present new challenges to the adolescent reader. Yet, few adolescents receive ongoing literacy instruction. In the middle and secondary grades, students are also asked to compose increasingly sophisticated pieces of writing for different purposes and audiences. Teachers now recognize that adolescents benefit from literacy instruction throughout the high school years, yet not all adolescents need the same amount or type of literacy instruction and support. In addition, teachers also recognize that they need to broaden the definition of literacy to include not only the traditional skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing, but also the new multimedia and digital literacies.

In a high school classroom, the range of learners is vast. The challenge for the classroom teacher is how to address the range of needs these diverse learners present. Douglas B. Fisher of San Diego State University acknowledges the problem of adolescent literacy, and he suggests that “with the diverse student needs seen today, it is time for less prescriptive and more ‘personal’ teaching differentiated for each student” (2007, 12). Adolescent learners can benefit from individualized, differentiated learning plans. Educators need to ensure that students receive instruction at the appropriate level. In addition, as a recent NCTE research report reminds teachers, “When instruction does not address

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adolescent's literacy needs, motivation and engagement are diminished” (NCTE 2006, 5).

In “Adolescent Literacy: A Policy Research Brief” (NCTE 2007), six key practices that promote adolescent literacy through research-based teaching practices are highlighted:

1. Demystify content-specific literacy practice.
2. Motivate through meaningful choice.
3. Engage students with real-world literacy practice.
4. Affirm multiple literacy.
5. Support learner-centered environment.
6. Foster social responsibility through multicultural literacy.

Because differentiated classrooms are student-centered, taking students from their individual entry points into the curriculum and moving them toward common goals, differentiated instruction provides a way for classroom teachers to address each of these six points.

The first factor identified in the NCTE Research Brief is to demystify content-specific literacy practices by having English teachers work collaboratively with their colleagues in other disciplines to develop instructional strategies in literacy that can be used across the curriculum to help students learn any subject matter better. As the NCTE report notes, middle and high school teachers need to “show students how literacy operates within the academic disciplines” so that adolescents can “learn from the texts they read” (NCTE 2007). This includes language across the curriculum strategies that address the differentiated needs of adolescent learners.

Choice, the second key practice identified, is a major factor in motivating adolescents to learn, and it is a major component of differentiated instruction in all disciplines. Building choice into an assignment provides a way to address student differences in academic readiness, personal interests, and learning styles. Strategies that support differentiated instruction, such as tic-tac-toe, tiered assignments, and learning stations, can be structured to incorporate an element of choice.
The third key factor identified in the NCTE report, real-world practices, provides another opportunity for differentiating instruction. When assignments are constructed to reflect literacy practices outside the classroom, different purposes and text forms offer a practical way to differentiate tasks. For example, when reading and producing persuasive texts, some students may identify a company they wish to correspond with about a product they used, and others may decide to write a letter to the editor about rules for skateboarding in their town. Still other students may write in a blog on censorship and the movies.

The fourth factor, affirming multiple literacies, is built into many differentiated instruction strategies. Tic-tac-toe or choice boards, for example, can offer students choices among an array of multimodal assignments. These can incorporate Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences (1983) or offer print as well as digital choices. Because differentiated instruction is built on the premise that students learn in different ways, differentiated learning activities embrace multiple literacies.

The fifth key practice identified in the NCTE Research Brief (2007) is supporting a learner-centered environment. Differentiated classrooms use a variety of methods for presenting, processing, and assessing learning. The practices teachers use—individual, group, and whole-class instruction—are based on demonstrated need. Ongoing assessments help the teacher identify what instruction individual students need at different times during a unit of study. The goal in a differentiated classroom is for the students to receive the type and amount of instruction they need in order to reach the identified goals and to become independent learners.

The final key factor identified in the NCTE report is fostering social responsibility through multicultural literacy. Differentiated practices offer opportunities for adolescents to reach beyond their local communities. Reading multicultural literature and communicating with diverse audiences through the Internet are two ways teachers can make adolescents aware of their responsibilities as members of a multicultural community. Building on student interests, teachers can design assignments that reach beyond the classroom.

Differentiated instruction helps teachers focus on the needs of adolescent literacy learners. It allows the teacher to build lessons based on student strengths and to provide instruction for student weaknesses. As Carol Ann Tomlinson notes,
differentiated instruction “is about making sure the learning fits the learner” (2008, 28). Adolescent learners need and deserve English language arts teachers who know how to assess what these learners know and are able to do. Such enlightened educators, after assessment, can plan and teach literacy support strategies to help each student. Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007) define these strategies as instructional methods and activities that support learning by “breaking down” literacy into smaller, more manageable “chunks.” For some students, these chunks could include using a graphic organizer to outline and connect nonfiction text. For others, these chunks could mean participating in a Socratic seminar to think collaboratively about a reading selection. The teacher's goal in using such differentiated literacy support strategies is to help every learner become more independent. Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007) further challenge English language arts educators to consider that there are really only two main tasks with regard to all of literacy teaching and learning. Instructors must match students' needs, interest, and learning styles not only to instruction but also to appropriate text. Therefore, the English language arts educator must be knowledgeable about ways to differentiate instruction and select materials to support success and independence.
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