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Elizabeth Birr Moje on “Disciplinary Literacy” and Reading Across the Content Areas

By: [Art Peterson](#)

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Summary: Elizabeth Birr Moje makes the case for a *disciplinary literacy* that, rather than hewing to generic literacy “strategies,” focuses on the literacy skills required of practitioners in a content field. Moje will be the keynote speaker at the 2010 National Reading Initiative Conference.



Elizabeth Birr Moje

 [Podcast with Moje](#) expounding on building disciplinary literacy instructional programs.

What does it mean to be "smart" in a discipline? Does it mean knowing many facts? Does it mean understanding the discipline's important theoretical ideas? Does it mean being able to understand what questions the discipline is meant to address? Perhaps it means to be able to create knowledge that addresses those very questions?

And related to all of these possibilities, one might also ask what it means to read or write successfully within that discipline.

For many educators these multiple and seemingly conflicting demands frame the essential questions about teaching and learning in their discipline. That's why the ideas of [Elizabeth Birr Moje](#), who will deliver the keynote address at the [NWP National Reading Initiative Conference, What's Next: Possibilities for Literacy and Content Area Learning](#), to be held on March 5-6 in New Orleans, deserve their attention.

Moje, a professor of Literacy, Language and Culture in the Educational Studies Department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, is urging educators to give attention to a focus she calls *disciplinary literacy*.

The idea of disciplinary literacy is not new in itself. It has a rich tradition in the field of rhetoric among those interested in writing in the disciplines, and it seems to have grown fresh legs lately among those interested in adolescent literacy. Moje has been a leader among those arguing that thinking about disciplinary literacy will help us understand how to think more productively about the thinking and learning demands students face as they move through different content area classes that make up a typical high school day.

It's Moje's belief that each discipline has its own literacy and that by stripping away the one-size-fits-all literacy "strategies" and engaging students in the way historians and scientists actually read and write, literacy learning will be central, no longer a side dish.

Theory that Starts in the Classroom

Moje's thinking about disciplinary literacy has evolved out of years of experience as a high school teacher of history, biology, and drama, as well as out of her university work with school-based colleagues.

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"Many years of experience have shaped my thinking about disciplinary/adolescent literacy," she says. "During my years as a regular classroom teacher, I routinely found myself frustrated with my inability to get kids to engage in reading and writing disciplinary texts. At the same time, I witnessed them reading and writing all sorts of texts on their own time, or for dramatic productions that I directed, so I knew that they would or could read or write when they had a purpose or an interest."

Moje's work as scholar and ethnographer supports these earlier understandings. She has spent more than eight years following children in the low-income, predominantly Latino southwest side of Detroit. Working with these young people, she found that they would devour books like the *Harry Potter* series, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, and Louis Sachar's *Holes*. However, confronted with most textbooks, their enthusiasm for reading shriveled.

Alternatives to Textbooks

Moje's solution: Put the textbook on the back burner. Textbooks, she believes, are a primary culprit in what Theodore Sizer has described as the "pedagogy of telling," providing content area

teachers with a vehicle for covering vast amounts of information in short periods of time at the expense of the understanding that makes for true engagement.

Moje would replace dependence on a single text with the tools that workers in a scholarly field actually use. Students of history, for instance, would have at their disposal a variety of source documents that would help them construct their own narrative and understandings.

"Literacy thus becomes an essential aspect of disciplinary practice, rather than a set of strategies or tools brought into the disciplines to improve reading and writing of subject-matter texts," she wrote in [Foregrounding the Disciplines in Secondary Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Call for Change](#), which appeared in the October 2008 issue of the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. (For more, listen to the accompanying [podcast](#).)

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Moje is realistic about the difficulties of such an approach. She tells the story from her own classroom experience. As a history teacher she had assigned her students to read one of *The Federalist Papers*. "The next day I asked, 'So what was Madison trying to say?' I was met by blank stares. The work was not accessible to my students."

She knows that it will be the educator's job to find user-friendly materials and provide the scaffolding that will generate understanding. This task is somewhat easier now than it was when Moje was a classroom teacher. Now multiple text types and new media are at the fingertips of teachers and students.

"Teachers can employ many different forms of representation to construct knowledge of one concept—different genres (e.g. narrative, expository, poetics, music), different symbol systems (e.g. print, graphs, tables), and different semiotic tools (image, sound, and performance)," she writes in *Foregrounding the Disciplines in Secondary Teaching and Learning*. "Each of these forms—now readily available through digital venues—can support the construction of knowledge necessary to access the abstract print text of the disciplines."

Linking Learning and Life

For any of this to work, however, Moje insists on another principle that has been at the forefront of her work for many years. Learning must be linked to everyday life. She provides an example in which she and her colleagues asked middle school students to analyze data from a hypothetical experiment designed to test a mother's advice that two young women wash their hands for at least 15 seconds to reduce bacteria growth.

"In their conclusions we asked students to both write a scientific claim based on the data and write what they would tell their mothers about the experiment. As a literacy activity, students

had to read data from charts and then make their claims. One student drew this (uncorrected) conclusion: 'They should tell there mom that she was right and they were wrong and they should of believed her in the first place 'cause mama knows best.'" These students were acting as scientists, but in the context of a familiar experience.

Moje understands that the road to disciplinary literacy is fraught with roadblocks and uncertainties. For example, "What opportunities do teacher education and inservice professional development provide teachers to learn about the discursive basis of their subject matter? How many disciplinary teachers have a deep understanding of the knowledge-producing practices of their discipline?"

To bring about these changes will require "the involvement of teacher educators, school administrators, teachers, researchers, national policymakers, and the young people themselves."

So what can the classroom teachers do now to nudge along the changes Moje is advocating? "One simple step is to use text—as opposed to textbooks—more and to engage students in text-based discussion, regardless of the discipline. Teachers can model how to look back to texts and draw from ideas in the text to make arguments and require students to use writing to augment those text-based discussions. These discussions can be bolstered if kids are encouraged to write their opinions and the author's views or perspective before discussing."

A lot of what Moje is attempting to accomplish involves changing the face of teacher education. "We are trying to innovate teacher education so that preservice teachers can both learn about the nature of language and literacy in their disciplines and how to challenge notions of the discipline as something that exists apart from human invention. We want to really shake up the usual practice of field-based learning."

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