

## **Changing teacher beliefs about promoting literacy in content area classes**

Barbara Glaeser  
California State University, Fullerton

Marilyn Leuer  
California State University, Fullerton

Maria Grant  
California State University, Fullerton

### **ABSTRACT**

The Reading Institutes for Academic Preparation (RIAP) is a professional development program for teachers who teach in grades 9-12 in both English and other content areas, such as math and science. Sponsored by the California State University System, it is part of a multifaceted program designed to improve student literacies statewide and reduce the need for remediation among regularly admitted first-time freshmen to the CSU system. The program at CSU Fullerton operated from 2008-2011, with a focus on changing teacher beliefs about their practices in promoting literacy in content area classes. While the majority of participants were teachers of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, middle school and 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grade teachers were occasionally included in the program. Data were collected in the form of pre and post survey and records from focus groups. Results showed that teachers changed both their practices and their beliefs about their role in building literacy in content area classrooms.

Keywords: Literacy, content area, teacher beliefs, Reading Institute for Academic Preparation, preparation for college

## INTRODUCTION

Almost half college applicants nationwide do not meet placement standards and thus are not prepared for college-level work (Kirst & Venezia, 2005). In California, greater than 60 percent of first-time freshmen admitted to the California State University in 2011, roughly 25,000 students state wide, required remedial education in English, mathematics or both, despite the fact that they have taken the required college preparatory curriculum and earned at least a B grade point average in high school (The California State University, 2011, <http://www.calstate.edu/eap>). In response to this critical need, the California State University created the Reading Institutes for Academic Preparation (RIAP). RIAP is a professional development program primarily intended for teachers of students in grades 9-12, in both English and other content area courses. It is a part of a multifaceted state-wide program designed to improve student literacies statewide and reduce the need for remediation among regularly admitted first-time freshmen to the CSU system. (See Fleming, Unrau, Cooks, Davis, Farnan & Grisham, 2007, for a review of the development of this project). In-service teachers who enroll in RIAP agree to engage in 80 hours of professional learning over a summer and a full school year, and agree to implement a change in their current practices to promote literacy in their content area classes. Seminars and readings are provided that address academic literacy, classroom instruction and assessment, standards-based planning, reading comprehension, vocabulary, academic language, and writing. Teachers learn specifically about college and workplace expectations, and how to best prepare students to meet these levels of performance.

One critical aspect of changing current teaching practices is to change the beliefs teachers hold about the teaching of literacy in a content area class. According to Shanahan and Shanahan (2008), traditionally, the most prevalent belief has been that basic literacy skills are acquired in the lower grades, allowing students in middle and high school with adequate background knowledge to easily read and understand content texts in the higher grades. As a result of this belief, content area teachers believed that their job was to teach content, not how to read the texts. This line of thinking may have adequately prepared students in the past for the plethora of blue-collar jobs, but the reality today is that these beliefs about how literacy develops and the instructional practices that it engenders are no longer effective. Thus, teachers must learn to resist or change their beliefs and learn ways to incorporate literacy learning practices into their content teaching. Although can be a challenging task, changing the beliefs of secondary content teachers toward new literacy practices can be successful if the professional development is centered on content learning and not limited to strategies that focus only on reading skills (Wilson, Grisham, & Smetana, 2009). The RIAP program was designed specifically for this purpose.

### CSU FULLERTON RIAP

CSU Fullerton Reading Institutes for Academic Preparation program operated from 2007-2011. Faculty recruited administrators and teachers from local high and middle schools who would agree to commit to attend summer workshops in June and August and meetings throughout the school year, and to implement what they were learning. Teachers and administrators who participated in the Institutes understood that developing classroom case studies, including the design and implementation of literacy-based lessons, was a required. In

order to track progress, teachers and administrators agreed to collect and provide data indicating resulting student progress. At the end of the school-year, teachers submitted a final portfolio that included case study information, including pre and post assessments, samples of literacy based lesson plans and student work. In addition, participants wrote reflections about their RIAP experiences. Attendees who completed all aspects of the program received a stipend of \$750 in addition to numerous books and resources.

## **THE MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAM**

The leadership team consisted of faculty from many disciplines. In addition to the required faculty from English, faculty members represented different departments from California State University at Fullerton. The Director, Dr. Author Two, Associate Professor of Secondary Education, added her rich background in both literacy and science to the RIAP team. Dr. Author One, Professor of Special Education, brought expertise relating to literacy development and students with special needs. Dr. Chris Street, Professor, Secondary Education, shared his essential EWRC experience as well as his literacy knowledge. Dr. April Brannon, Assistant Professor of English, comparative literature, represented the content area of English. Author Three, lecturer of Secondary Education, added her knowledge as a Reading Specialist and former District Curriculum Specialist.

Each member of the team shared research as well as classroom practices with the participants during the respective seminars they presented. Each brought perspectives from their own discipline which as a whole gave teachers the tools to work with all students, including English Learners and students with special needs. For example, Dr. Street used the outstanding texts “They Say, I Say, The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing” by Graff, Birkenstein and Durst (2006) and “Reading Rhetorically” by Bean, Chappell and Gillam (2011) to model successful, research-based classroom strategies related to academic writing. These were particularly motivating for students whose first language was not English. Dr. Author Two used her text, “Reading and Writing in Science: Tools to Develop Disciplinary Literacy” (2010, with Doug Fisher), to demonstrate the importance of including reading, writing and oral language into teaching the content area of science. Dr. Author One provided training on instructional routines developed at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning for including special education students into content area lessons. The “Concept Mastery” and “Unit Organizer” Routines were learned and practiced, as well as the SLANT behavior management strategy. Mrs. Author Three reviewed the importance of content area study guides and introduced illustrated journaling, which uses art as a way to enhance literacy development in all disciplines.

In addition to team members, CSUF RIAP also recruited well known literacy specialists like Dr. Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey. Dr. Fisher’s Disciplinary Literacy seminar underscored the importance of process versus strategies. Dr. Frey focused the participants thinking on the importance of “Gradual Release of Responsibility” as it relates to literacy development. One of the favorite sessions was a full-day of technology led by Dr. Cynthia Gautreau. In her presentation she explored a comic strip site with teachers. They developed comics designed to enhance literacy in specific content areas. Dr. Gautreau also gave examples of how she uses blogs to enrich literacy skills across curriculums.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

In order to determine the effects of the training and implementation of the RIAP program, both qualitative and quantitative data was collected to determine the effects of the training on teacher beliefs.

### **Quantitative**

Before teachers were trained, they were provided an adapted form of the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP). The Theoretical Orientation to Reading (TORP) was developed by Diane E. DeFord (1978). A 1980 (unpublished) study by Bishop, Bean and Author Three used the TORP to measure the degree to which teacher beliefs about the reading process might be updated through attendance at a weekend mini-conference focused on classroom application of findings from contemporary psycholinguistic research. The Keynote Speaker was Dr. Yetta Goodman who presented "Reading and the Linguistically Different Learner." The TORP was adapted for use with RIAP. Questions relating to the contemporary topic of Disciplinary Literacy were added. The TORP was administered as a pretest prior to any discussion of literacy or instructional sessions. The post test was administered at the final RIAP seminar. Participants who didn't attend the first session or the last session were asked to complete the survey online. The TORP was administered as a pre and posttest.

### **Qualitative**

After implementation of their learning in the classroom, teachers were interviewed on their experiences and asked for written feedback. The teacher responses to interview questions were video recorded and reviewed for emerging themes. Written responses were similarly examined and themes were gleaned for final analysis and reporting.

## **RESULTS**

Although data was collected over the years, only a preliminary analysis has been completed at the time of this writing. The following are the results of data collected for 2009-2010 (Author Two, Author Three, Author One, 2011).

### **Quantitative**

A dependent samples t-test was conducted on the TORP results. Two questions showed significant differences from pretest in teacher beliefs about literacy development ( $p < .05$ ). The first of these asked teachers to rate their level of agreement on a Likert-type scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" with the following statement: "The more errors a student makes when reading aloud, the poorer is his/her reading ability." Before instruction, 5.6% agreed ( $n = 1$ ), 22.2% ( $n = 4$ ) were undecided, and 72.3% disagreed ( $n = 12$ ) or strongly disagreed ( $n = 1$ ). After implementation, 7.1% ( $n = 4$ ) were undecided, and 92.8% disagreed ( $n = 10$ ) or strongly disagreed ( $n = 3$ ). These results show that content teachers were relying on oral reading to determine reading ability, and they learned over time that this was misleading. The second

question that showed significant differences from pretest to posttest asked teachers to rate their agreement with the statement: “A good practice for introducing content material is to ask students to take turns reading paragraphs aloud to the class.” Before implementation, 5.6% agreed (n = 3), 27.8% (n = 5) were undecided, and 33.3% disagreed (n = 5). After implementation, 6.7% agreed (n = 1) 6.7% (n = 1) were undecided, and 86.7% disagreed (n = 6) or strongly disagreed (n = 7). Thus after implementation, participating teachers realized there are alternatives to ineffective “Round-Robin-Reading” often practiced in content classrooms.

## **Qualitative**

Below is a summary of the post open-ended evaluation questions. Overwhelmingly participants found CSUF’s 2010-2011 Reading Institute for Academic Preparation (RIAP) to be engaging, informative, and of great value to classroom teachers. Detailed summaries of responses to specific prompts (given for each session) are found below. These include overall perspectives as well as individual comments.

### **1. *What part of RIAP did you find the most useful?***

Participants cited several RIAP activities when asked about what was of most value. Specifically, several mentioned that the hands-on activities and lessons were useful. One participant mentioned the reading and writing strategies, while another stated that she appreciated the foldables, adding that she has already implemented this 3-D graphic organizer/notetaking strategy into her teaching repertoire. Others noted that the personal library of books (with a special nod to the book *They Say, I Say*) was highly appreciated. Guest speakers, Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey, were distinguished as stand-out presenters who both offered relevant, real-world ideas for easy classroom implementation. One respondent also mentioned that he greatly enjoyed the panel discussion (CSUF biology students), led by Dr. Bill Hoese, biology professor at CSUF.

### **2. *Did you find the College Access Study to be beneficial? Explain.***

Most of the respondents stated that the College Access Study (CAS) was beneficial. Participants mentioned that they learned how to diagnose student needs more precisely and were even able to identify appropriate instructional strategies more skillfully than before RIAP. Furthermore, teachers mentioned that the CAS helped them to learn more about their schools and students. One person mentioned that she became more strategic in her planning as a result of doing the CAS.

### **3. *Did you find the presentation of EAP data useful? Explain.***

All participants said that the EAP presentation was useful. One participant stated the EAP data should be shared with both faculty and students. One participant said she now discusses the EAP with her students (who previously knew nothing about it, even though their school participates in the EAP assessment).

**4. *Did you find the academic writing presentations useful? Explain.***

Again, participants found the academic writing presentations to be of great value. Specifically, participants mentioned that they learned new strategies. One participant mentioned that she now has a better understanding of university faculty's expectations for students, especially as this relates to writing. She added that she has learned that scaffolding is the key, and she has started using sentence frames from a variety of disciplines.

**5. *Did you find the lesson planning presentation useful? Explain.***

A few thought that this presentation was a bit overwhelming. One participant noted that the template seemed too complicated to be useful to her. Others, however, did express their interest in using some of the pre-reading, reading, and post-reading ideas. Another stated that, because she went to CSUF for her credential work, she feels she is already an expert in planning and this presentation did not, therefore, hold much value.

**6.**

**7. *Did you find the adolescent literacy presentation useful? Explain.***

All agreed that this participation was very valuable. One participant noted that, as a social studies teacher, she often struggles with integrating literacy. This presentation really helped her to bridge that gap in her instructional planning. Another stated that it brought to her attentions areas of need in her own classroom. One participant stated that while she really enjoyed this presentation, she wished there was a stronger connection between RIAP materials and the presentation.

**8. *Did you find the vocabulary presentation useful?***

This session received very favorable evaluations. Participant comments included the following: I now see vocabulary as more than just definitions, I loved the foldables to use for vocabulary, Now I know how to teach vocabulary and introduce it in my content, and I see vocabulary instruction very differently now. I like the framework for selecting vocabulary provided in the book *Word Wise, Content Rich*. These comments characterize the appreciative nature of the feedback regarding the vocabulary session.

**9. *Did you find the panel session with CSUF Biology students useful? Explain.***

This was a new session for the CSUF RIAP, and it was one that was overwhelming cited as being incredibly powerful. For this session, we invited a panel of CSUF Biology students, who along with their professor, Dr. Bill Hoese and Dr. Jennifer Burnaford, shared their insights regarding their high school education in terms of their preparation for university studies. RIAP participants stated that they enjoyed hearing from the voices of students just like those that currently sit in our Orange County classrooms. They added that this session was "enlightening" and inspirational. One teacher has now started a student focus group, so that she can continue to be informed by student learners in her own class.

**9. *Did you find the technology presentation useful? Explain.***

The majority of the participants really enjoyed and benefitted from the technology session. One stated that she appreciated the focus on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as they relate to literacy. Another was glad that she was able to sit down at a computer to investigate sites as the presenter shared them. Only one person thought it was too much information all at once. Most were able to follow along and thought the pacing was appropriate.

**10. *Did you find the academic reading presentation useful? Explain.***

Participants appreciated the guidance in terms of reading instruction and noted the numerous specific strategies that were offered as part of this session. Several talked about their increased knowledge of critical reading for struggling students. Others said that they still feel they need more to have a full understanding of how to help students increase reading comprehension and fluency.

## **DISCUSSION**

Data from this preliminary look at results clearly indicated that teachers benefitted greatly from participation in the reading institute. Misconceptions in literacy were remediated to reflect the current research on literacy, including reading, in content area classes. Teachers reported greater self-efficacy through increased knowledge, skill, and motivation to teach reading, writing, and content language. Additionally, they reported that classroom case study data showed improved literacy skills on the part of students in individual classrooms, as indicated through a wide array of formative and summative assessments. In sum, teachers indicated that participation in RIAP changed both thinking and practice. They unanimously noted that they would recommend participation in RIAP to colleagues on their school site campuses. Further analysis of this data, analysis of data from other years of the institute, and analysis of additional data, including video-taped interviews, is continuing. Follow-up interviews to determine the maintenance of strategies learned by teachers as a result of participation in the institute is also under development.

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