

## Research Connections

### Learning to Link Research, Practice, and Disciplinary Literacies: An Interview With Darin Stockdill

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**D**arin Stockdill is a doctoral candidate in the Literacy, Language, and Culture concentration in the Educational Studies program at the University of Michigan. He has served as a community literacy program coordinator, youth violence and substance abuse prevention specialist, social studies and English teacher, and curriculum coach. His research interests include adolescent literacy, content area literacy with an emphasis on secondary social studies, and teacher education.

**DM:** How did you connect research with practice in your classroom before you began your doctoral program?

**DS:** I was a secondary school English and social studies teacher for several years in Detroit. My students had a wide range of abilities and engagement levels. I wasn't happy with the quality of the teaching and learning in my classroom, so I began looking for ideas. I attended professional development sessions and started reading the professional literature.

I began to notice that much of the practitioner literature I was reading used the term *research based* but often oversimplified or even misrepresented the research. For example, I received a handout on reciprocal teaching at a professional development session and used some of the ideas in my classroom. I later read Palincsar and Brown's (1984) original report and found that the handout presented a very watered down version of reciprocal teaching. I continued to read more on my own, and I became even more interested in reports of educational research.

After three years of teaching, I was given the opportunity to lead a team of teachers in a curriculum mapping project to better align our courses with the state benchmarks. As that project was ending, my principal asked me to continue working on curriculum development and teacher professional development, so I became a part-time teacher and part-time curriculum coach. In this role, I began leading professional development sessions with my colleagues, and I started pulling together resources from research on content area reading for these sessions.

I later entered a master's degree program in social foundations of education that exposed me to more of the research literature and introduced me to research methodologies. I began to carry out small action research projects in my classroom as part of my university course work, and I conducted a qualitative study for my thesis. The more research I encountered, the more I became convinced that a lot of important work was being done; yet, for various reasons, many of my colleagues were not drawing on it. These experiences motivated me to begin

doctoral study with the goal of engaging in both research and teacher education as processes that could inform each other.

**DM:** How have your research–practice connections continued since you entered a doctoral program?

**DS:** I entered graduate school with the desire to carry out research that benefited classroom instruction, and I have been exposed to some great models of this. For example, I had the opportunity to work with Elizabeth Moje in studying adolescent literacy in urban schools and then using our findings to help shape professional development in those schools.

While analyzing hundreds of writing samples in one school, we observed a few clear patterns of strengths and weaknesses in the students' work. We then implemented a professional development experience in which teachers analyzed some of the same writing samples to look for similar patterns. Finally, we compared analyses and worked together with the teachers to identify teaching practices and resources that supported students' writing strengths and developed their areas of weakness. Through this experience, I gained an understanding of how schools serving as research sites can also become sites for professional development and collaboration, and I hope to continue work in this framework.

**DM:** What guides your preparation of preservice teachers to incorporate literacy with subject matter teaching?

**DS:** A big part of my work is urging preservice teachers to think about literacy in new ways. I find the triarchic model of reading comprehension (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Rumelhart, 1994) to be incredibly powerful as a conceptual tool in this regard. According to this model, reading occurs as a complex interaction between readers, texts, and activities; each of these components has a role to play and is a factor in learning while reading.

This model applies very well to content area literacy instruction. Students have particular attitudes about history, for example, as well as prior conceptualizations of it. The history texts they read are written in a certain way, with technical vocabulary and language particular to history. Finally, the reading activities are shaped by teachers and their lesson structures.

When educators use texts in their classrooms as learning tools, they do well to make the most of the triarchic, interactive reading comprehension model and its components. Educators often focus on changing readers somehow when things don't go as well as desired—but changing the texts along with the activities to support students' success deserves attention, too.

For example, if a particular text is useful but poorly written, teachers may want to rewrite or reorganize it to make it more accessible. Reading activities may also need to be changed. Students often are asked to read and then answer a series of questions, but if they are given an interesting question before reading and then directed to read and respond to it as a group with their classmates, their reading may be more focused.

Another big part of my preparation of preservice teachers involves instruction in the ways practitioners of particular disciplines use literacy. Instruction in disciplinary literacies provides the means to learn and use subject matter in authentic ways. Historians do not interpret primary documents to prepare for tests; they interpret primary documents to answer authentic questions or solve significant problems.

When students explore compelling issues like historians, they begin to apprentice themselves into communities of practice (Lave, 1991; Rogoff, 1990), and learning becomes more dynamic and meaningful. Although these apprenticeships tend to happen more at the undergraduate and graduate levels, they can certainly be developed in high school as well. For example, instead of each student studying Reconstruction to prepare for a test in U.S. history, students as a group could learn background information and analyze documents to explore how Reconstruction did or did not resolve the problems that led to the Civil War.

**DM:** What perspective on disciplinary literacies do you find most compelling?

**DS:** I have learned much about disciplinary literacies by viewing them with an epistemic perspective, by examining how scholars in different disciplines interpret and produce knowledge through their reading and writing. Historians, for example, identify and frame intellectual problems that interest them, analyze evidence across a range of sources related to the problems, and produce their own

accounts based upon their analyses (Bain, 2000). Within this process, historians think and read in certain ways to understand the past.

Historians also have been shown to employ important reading practices such as sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration (Wineburg, 2001). In sourcing, historians question the background, point of view, purpose, audience, and role of an account's producer. When contextualizing, they consider the larger historical, political, and social context in which an account was produced. Finally, in corroborating, historians read across multiple sources to compare and contrast accounts. These practices are part of the disciplinary literacies of history.

Understanding disciplinary knowledge production and literacy practices helps me think about how history teaching and learning can be transformed for classrooms. Secondary-level students generally do not have the background knowledge and experience necessary to approach historical inquiry in the same way as professional historians, so this is where new forms of instruction come into play.

Teachers might engage students in authentic historical inquiry in which they identify questions, respond to these questions by using multiple texts, and then produce their own historical accounts that answer their questions. During this process, teachers can help students consider who produced the texts and the contexts in which they were produced, compare and contrast the different writings, and generate their own accounts of events.

Of course, much preparation goes into developing these sorts of lessons, and students need much support

as they learn to approach history this way. The payoff of students learning to read and think deeply about the past to understand the present and anticipate the future appears well worth the effort.

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