

BOOK REVIEW

Thinking like a generalist: Skills for making sense of a complex world



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Book review

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Thinking like a generalist represents the desire of its authors to make students do learning. Doing learning here means that students get the skills needed to successfully navigate the information landscape in school and the world in the classroom. According to the authors, schools have largely concerned themselves with preparing students for future careers while failing to see that the daily information needs of adults are not primarily related to academia or even careers. The authors in this book argue for the introduction of what they term as “generalist literacy” to the school curriculum to bridge this gap. This concept is not radically new or unfamiliar. Generalist literacy according to the authors is an “approach to real-world information *generalist literacy*, a term borrowed from Lewis Mumford’s concept of the ‘generalist’ (1961). Generalist literacy is what we use when working outside our specialist fields or areas of competence. For example, a chemist uses a generalist thinking when trying to understand geology or how to comfort her colicky baby” (Kohnen & Saul, 2020, p. 7). From this definition, it is clear that generalist thinking is something we already do in our day-to-day lives.

According to the authors, generalist thinking brings into the classroom curiosity, open-minded skepticism, and persistence. Curiosity is wondering about why things are the way they are, with the goal of gaining understanding. Open-minded skepticism is the willingness to accept any conclusion that can be deduced from questioning the way things are. Persistence is the ability to endure painstaking processes for getting a task done. These three attitudes are undeniably essential attitudes that are needed for navigating the complex world.

Generally, the book is written in an easy to read manner. The narrative in the book is clear, fluid and without unnecessary gilding which might impede the understanding of the arguments of the authors. At various points in the book, there are tips that can help the reader successfully understand how to teach generalist literacy in the classroom.

The book is broadly divided into three parts with each part containing a number of chapters. The first part of the book titled “The case for generalist literacy” divided into three chapters gives a conceptual clarification of generalist literacy. The first chapter of the book answers the questions of what is generalist thinking? Why do we even need generalist thinking? It is in chapter two that we learn what contribution generalist literacy brings to the classroom. According to the authors, these attitudes were deduced from their

interaction and examination of the way generalist thinkers do their thinking. The authors highlight the read-aloud-think-aloud method as a way of making students learn better by demonstrating how active reading enables thinkers to connect with ideas. Chapter 3 introduces the three steps of generalist thinking which are orienting, sourcing, consolidating and synthesizing. Orienting is the stage where a learner examines what he or she knows about a topic of interest. According to the authors, it involves “getting the lay of the land before digging in deeply” (p. 44) while sourcing is understanding where and how to find information related to targeted information-seeking needs. Consolidating is the act of gathering information while synthesizing involves “putting information together and seeing the connection and contradictions that emerge” (p. 48).

After the conceptual clarification done in the first part of the book, the second part offers a guide on how teachers can become generalist thinkers themselves. This part prepares the teacher for teaching generalist literacy in the classroom. Specifically, the teacher is guided on how to pick a lesson topic and all the steps needed to prepare the topic for teaching in the classroom. Also, there is a clear demonstration of the steps of generalist thinking discussed in the second part of the book in this part of the book.

The third part of the book titled “Examples from the classroom” contains only one chapter where the authors offer instances of when and how generalist literacy was deployed in the classroom. This chapter offers a framework for planning generalist instruction activities in the classroom. For example, a teacher introduced generalist literacy to her students by having them create a watercolor book on birds native to their home state of Missouri. To achieve this, the students had to search for information on birds in their state, interview a professor on why the birds live in their region and as well as use the information they had gotten to write the chapters of the class book. In doing this, the students learnt how to gather information through credible sources, conduct research and interviews, and also do something they found exciting which is to work with water colors. Through this, the students learnt how to search for credible sources of information, interview an expert and also how to put information they had learnt into visual and linguistic items. Another example shows how a teacher introduced generalist literacy to her students by having them explore the history of the local rail route in their community. Building on the curiosity the students had about how the rail came about, the teacher was able

to teach the students how to research and conduct interviews. Each of these examples is followed by an explanation of how to effectively use these frameworks in the classroom. Thinking like a Generalist is a book that will resonate with teachers concerned about how they will prepare their students for an ever-changing world.

REFERENCES

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