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Grey Clouds and Silver Linings: Professional Learning for Secondary Educators during COVID-19

by Jenelle Williams



Jenelle Williams

Literacy in the Secondary Classroom: The Dream

Long before the pandemic hit, members of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network (GELN) Disciplinary Literacy Task Force had been deeply engaged in thinking about what it might take to scale a statewide conversation about literacy in every secondary classroom. We dreamed forward and envisioned this scene:

In the secondary grades, content-expert educators would enable students to develop the skills of disciplinary literacy, including the specialized vocabulary, communication practices, and tools for each discipline. From this, students would learn to navigate reading, writing, speaking, and listening demands. These demands would then shift depending on the contexts, purposes, and audiences specific to a discipline. Educators would provide instruction intentionally designed to support students as they are apprenticed into specific ways of thinking and communicating that are valued in subjects like mathematics, science, social studies, the English language arts, and all other secondary school content areas. In classrooms where disciplinary literacy is a focus, we would see students engaging in substantive, highly relevant learning that is readily applicable to life in and out of the classroom.

Task Force members designed a document to help articulate this dream further – the *Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12*, which identifies ten sets of instructional strategies that can be applied across academic disciplines, along with discipline-specific versions (available at literacyessentials.org). These instructional strategies are based on findings from an extensive review of a wide body of research conducted by a research team led by Drs. Elizabeth Moje and Darin Stockdill at the University of Michigan's Center for Education Design, Evaluation, and Research. Additionally, Michigan content and learning experts from the intermediate school districts (ISDs), state professional educator organizations, university researchers and educators, and the Michigan Department of Education have worked diligently to articulate these strategies within each of the four core subject areas.

As this work began in 2017, a group of Intermediate School District (ISD) consultants, representatives from the Michigan Department of Education, and additional content experts formed the Disciplinary Literacy Task Force. This group had a large dream and no budget. As many of us work for publicly-funded ISDs, the time spent on this project is possible due to a commitment

to sharing resources across Michigan's 56 ISD regions. Although we come from a wide range of communities across the state, all of our work is guided by a shared set of purpose statements. The Disciplinary Literacy Task Force exists in order to:

1. Scale the right work statewide
2. Ensure the work aligns with MAISA and MDE priorities
3. Secure and leverage partnerships that strengthen and further the work
4. Communicate statewide with practitioners, leaders, policy makers
5. Ensure equity in the delivery of services

As experienced facilitators of professional learning, Task Force members have continued the work over the past few years and feel confident that a commitment to continued shared learning around disciplinary literacy, as well as our collective consulting expertise, can make this dream a reality.

What We Know About Effective Professional Learning Design: Pivoting PD in an Era of Remote Learning

Professional learning design has come a long way from the old models of an annual, one-and-done in-service. Powerhouse organizations such as Learning Forward, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the International Literacy Association have also weighed in during recent years on the key elements of effective professional learning for all educators. Learning Forward's draft standards for professional learning include, among other categories, items that focus on equity foundations, a culture of collaborative inquiry, and leadership. Regarding equity foundations, educators are called upon to "establish a vision for equitable access to high-quality professional learning" (Learning Forward, 2020). As a Disciplinary Literacy Task Force, our purpose is to scale the right work statewide. For our purposes, the "right work" is ensuring equitable opportunities for Intermediate School District (ISD) consultants to learn about the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12* and consider implications for their local context. However, Task Force members also

know that full-time consultant positions are not shared equally among the 56 ISDs across our state, and many ISDs have one consultant to support the professional learning of K-12 teachers across all subject areas within their region. Additionally, as a small, 36-member Task Force with no budget, we have had to be smart about leveraging high-quality, free (or nearly free) resources and platforms. Task Force members have had to be willing to attempt new models for professional development, with ISD consultants learning alongside secondary teachers, instructional coaches, and leaders during what we named the "Introductory" and "Deeper Dive" Institutes.

The Introductory Institutes were held face-to-face in February and March 2020. These duplicate sessions provided participants with a broad overview of the process through which the *Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12* originated, including statewide stakeholders, the growing suite of *Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy* documents available on the project's website, and the key researchers. These sessions used activities to ground participants' understanding of disciplinary literacy along with the research that supports this shift in secondary classroom instruction. Finally, time was allocated for participants to use the Connect-Extend-Challenge protocol to briefly explore the practices themselves. With a promise to extend the learning via the Deeper Dive Institute, participants left with multiple resources to explore on their own in the interim. While we could not have anticipated the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning that abruptly changed our plans in March of 2020, we quickly shifted gears and planned to conduct the remaining Introductory Institute via Zoom.

Since the Deeper Dive Institute was going to be designed to extend professional learning around specific essential practices – and was still in its very early planning stages – it was quickly determined that a blend of synchronous and asynchronous virtual learning sessions would be both equitable and cost-effective. The format of these sessions is explained in more detail below, but to provide participants with additional

avenues for support, we created an asynchronous “teacher’s lounge” in Moodle and synchronous drop-in sessions that would allow participants to engage in real-time conversations.

Another proposed standard from Learning Forward places an emphasis on collaborative inquiry. Whether we identify this approach as teacher action research, teacher inquiry, or collaborative inquiry, we know that supporting teachers in identifying “puzzles of practice,” gathering relevant information and resources to support the inquiry, and engaging in attempting something new – and reflecting upon it – is a powerful tool to move instructional practice. For this reason, each asynchronous session of the Deeper Dive Institute has called upon participants to engage in inquiry cycles. After each asynchronous portion, participants join together to share their researchable question and engage in a modified Charette Protocol to receive feedback. This approach has also allowed consultants and secondary educators to do something that is not often supported by statewide professional learning efforts – make their learning visible. In a National Council of Teachers of English Position Statement, collaborative learning is identified as one of four key dimensions required in order for professional development to be an empowering experience for English Language Arts teachers (NCTE, 2019). By providing a dedicated space for teachers and consultants alike to share their puzzles of practice, as well as their successes and potential failures, we make a space for all educators to develop empathy for those they serve, whether this includes students or teachers. As educators, we cannot expect our learners to be willing to take educational risks or develop an inquiry stance if we are not able to try the same things.

The NCTE Position Statement also places emphasis on collaborative knowledge production. By modeling the types of inquiry stances and scaffolded sense-making for participants in the Introductory and Deeper Dive Institutes, facilitators offer a “two-track” agenda, empowering our participants to consider how to use such approaches within their own context. With such a unique opportunity to allow consultants and teachers

to learn alongside each other, we are seeing tremendous benefits. As the topic of disciplinary literacy is relatively new across the state, all of our participants are bringing both expertise in their roles and a curiosity about how to implement disciplinary literacy at the secondary level together, both of which provide an opportunity to bolster our current instructional approaches.

In addition to calls for collaborative inquiry and knowledge production, International Literacy Association’s 2018 Literacy Leadership Brief calls for teachers to

...be active learners within the event. They must be allowed to engage in new information (e.g., recognize and start with what they know and build toward the unknown) that is meaningful to them and is based on the work of their students. (ILA, 2018)

For example, in our most recent synchronous learning session, we engaged our participants in the “jigsaw” approach. The jigsaw protocol involves first chunking the text into portions, then “chunking” participants into expert groups based upon those portions, and finally bringing the jigsaw groups back together to discuss the article/excerpt as a whole. Using Zoom breakout rooms, we moved participants into both expert and jigsaw groups, thereby modeling how they might use the jigsaw protocol in their own classes, even if the learning would take place virtually.

What We’re Still Learning: Best Practice in Remote/Hybrid Scenarios

There has never been a shortage of “experts” willing to tell teachers about best practices, some with more research and experience to support their claims than others. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed the majority of educators (and “experts”) in uncertain or, to borrow an overused term, unprecedented times. While we may have research to support best practices with using technology, the American educational system has never encountered the reality of attempting to teach remotely, during a pandemic, with inequitable access to devices and broadband internet. The implications of this were not lost on Disciplinary Literacy Task

Force members, the majority of whom are content-area consultants from ISDs across Michigan that represent English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Leadership and School Improvement.

To that end, on August 4, 2020, Disciplinary Literacy Task Force members offered a virtual, half-day Introductory Institute. Due to the pandemic, we knew that most districts were not releasing any funds for teachers to attend any professional learning events. For this reason, and because we were not incurring any overhead costs, we decided to offer the Institute for free. Surprisingly, over 270 educators and consultants registered for the event. Of course, not every registrant ended up attending the event, but the planning team was encouraged by the positive response. Based on the success of the August event, we decided that there was sufficient interest to continue with our original plan and offer a follow-up professional learning series, the Deeper Dive Institute, as an on-going PD series during the 2020-21 academic year.

While facilitating the Deeper Dive Institute in a virtual environment allows for greater reach across the state of Michigan, it provides constraints as well. We knew that educators would be unable to use a substitute/guest teacher during the school day, so professional learning would need to occur after the school day ended. Additionally, since many teachers were teaching remotely, holding long virtual learning sessions after the end of the school day was out of the question. We set our sights at a 3:30 pm start time, often workable for secondary teachers, with a total time span of 1.5 hours for each of the four synchronous sessions. In between each synchronous session, participants would engage in approximately five hours of asynchronous learning organized in a Moodle course. Each asynchronous portion of learning included three categories of learning: Regarding the Research, Extending our Shared Learning, and Continuing Your Inquiry Cycle.

With such limited “face time” with participants during the Deeper Dive Institute, the planning team had to determine the appropriate amount of content to include. The *Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy*

Instruction in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12 outline ten practices for consideration. With only six hours of synchronous learning for the entire series, the planning team knew it would be futile to attempt to concentrate on all ten practices. To this end, we selected areas of focus that align to the planning process that teachers might use when planning a unit of study. We chose to begin with Essential Practice 1, which details problem- or inquiry-based approaches to planning a unit of study or lesson. This foundational practice is essential to adequately capture adolescent engagement and motivation. Once an authentic problem frame has been identified, teachers then need to intentionally plan to support student sense-making, all while using texts aligned to the problem frame. This led the planning team to focus on Essential Practice 2. Across all disciplines, there is extensive research and support for the role of academically productive talk in order to comprehend, consolidate, and refine ideas, so our third synchronous session focused on Essential Practice 5. For our final session, a focus on assessment *for* learning led us to Essential Practice 8.

With time in between sessions, the planning team knew that an effective throughline would be incredibly important. However, the most significant feedback was often delivered during the drop-in sessions allocated for the Deeper Dive participants. Scheduled as a kind of open office hours or casual chat, we offered these sessions as a way to connect the facilitators with participants as thinking partners. While only a small group of participants in the two cohorts attended these drop-in sessions, we were able to gather significant insights from their comments and concerns. For example, some were struggling to form connections between the synchronous and asynchronous sessions, which redirected our instruction in both formats. Additionally, to draw connections between the Introductory and Deeper Dive Institutes, regardless of the participants’ modality (i.e., face-to-face, synchronous or asynchronous), we relied upon explicit reference to our driving question: How can we leverage disciplinary literacy to deepen learning for all learners?

As we all know, despite our efforts, “The best laid

plans [...] often go awry” (Steinbeck, 1937). As a Task Force, we were thrilled with the initial registration responses: 116 participants signed up to engage in two cohorts. Then, reality set in. We were inadvertently confined by a global pandemic, so some participants never engaged, and some withdrew. In the end, between 20 and 30 participants have regularly participated in this virtual professional learning series throughout the 2020-21 academic year, and we continue to collect pertinent data about their learning experiences in an effort to guide future professional development opportunities.

Finding Silver Linings

Despite our struggles with finding the “right” platforms and engaging secondary educators en masse, there have

been many silver linings from our own professional learning this year. First and foremost, various technological platforms have allowed Task Force members to build supportive learning communities that encourage risk-taking amongst educators. Perhaps the key to the success of this learning series is the parallel, reciprocal role of consultant and educator. As we strive to democratize the process, we become side-by-side learners. Collaboratively, we both encourage and model a process that includes inquiry, sense-making, and scaffolding. This is deliberately followed by collective reflection – What did we do? Why did we do it? How does it connect with our driving question? How might we use it in our own context? These approaches seem to be resonating with our participants, who have offered positive feedback (see Fig. 1 below).

I loved the small group discussion!	The use of the Charette Protocol and defining "text."	An opportunity to talk with other educators in my content area.	I finally settled on my inquiry question!! I feel really good about it.
I enjoyed using Google Jamboard to collaborate. Been using these a lot with students and they are central to a curriculum module I am developing right now.	Good to hear what others are considering for their research.	The many meanings of "texts" and their development into sets around an inquiry.	Listening to X has been helpful. It helped me think more like a scientist even though I come from an ELA background.
The Jamboard	Receiving feedback on my inquiry question.	Processing my research/inquiry.	Consideration of what "text" is.
I'm just so grateful to think deeply about teaching practice during a time in which it seems like we're all in survival mode. Thank you!	Discussion group. I loved gaining ideas from my group members!	Sharing and receiving feedback from my peers (safe space).	The necessity of discussion norms. Lots of great conversations.
The resources from my colleagues.	The additional resource harvest and background information on jigsaw	Breakout sessions went very well.	
Talk time with colleagues. Good balance of structure and talk time.	The "Talk Science Primer" shared why, how, and what about discourse. That was a nice conversation.		

Figure 1. Screenshot of shared GDoc from institute: What was one “glow” from today’s session?

The year ahead continues to ripen the possibilities for scaling this work statewide. The Disciplinary Literacy Task Force is looking forward to providing additional professional learning in the summer of 2021. For educators new to the conversation about disciplinary literacy, we recommend the Introductory Institute on August 5, and for those looking to further their learning, we recommend the Deeper Dive Institute August 11 through 13. For more information on these events, as well as registration links, please visit our latest newsletter at <https://www.smores.com/qcbjp-essential-practices>.

While there are many aspects of remote learning that have challenged our collective thinking, there are also those silver linings that will both enhance and improve our professional learning and instructional delivery. Combining synchronous and asynchronous virtual learning sessions might be the most effective way to reduce barriers and reach educators across counties, districts, and disciplines with the goal that, eventually, we will enact a vision where disciplinary literacy practices are taught in every secondary classroom, every day.

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