

July 2022

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Laura Gabrion

Wayne RESA, gabriol@resa.net

Jenelle Williams

Oakland ISD, jenelle.williams@oakland.k12.mi.us

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Recommended Citation

Gabrion, Laura and Williams, Jenelle (2022) "Taking Up the Work: Snapshots of Disciplinary Literacy Instruction, Part I," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 54: Iss. 3, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol54/iss3/10>

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Taking Up the Work: Snapshots of Disciplinary Literacy Instruction, Part I

by Laura Gabrion and Jenelle Williams



Laura Gabrion



Jenelle Williams

This article is part of a series devoted to unpacking disciplinary literacy instructional practices for educators at all levels. While the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom* have been written with secondary educators in mind, key researchers throughout the state continue to encourage elements of disciplinary literacy instruction in pre-kindergarten and elementary classrooms, especially when considering the Michigan Revised Teacher Certification Structure. Because preservice teachers can now select from five intentionally overlapping grade bands (Birth-K, PreK-3, 3-6, 5-9, and 9-12), “we find ourselves at an optimal time to re-examine expectations for both educator preparation coursework and teachers’ instructional practice” (Williams & Gabrion, in press). Throughout this series, we will examine disciplinary literacy instruction in several content areas and also discuss the critical role that literacy and instructional coaches play in supporting the implementation of disciplinary literacy instructional practices.

Purposeful Literacy Instruction: Engaging Our Future Global Citizens

From the Glossary of the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy*, literacy is identified as “a collection of cultural and communicative practices that use some form of a symbol system to communicate

meaning, along with a technology to produce and share it” (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2021). These practices are shared among members of particular groups, referred to as discourse communities, and each community has its own unique approaches to problem solving, reading, writing, thinking, and speaking. In fact, “[e]ach of us belongs to a number of discourse communities. We may belong to particular religions or churches, to trades or professions, to political organizations, to belief systems, family groups, sporting affiliations and so on. Each affiliation carries its own language rules” (Little et al., 2003).

Academic disciplines also function as discourse communities with their own vocabularies, tools, and literacy practices. Apprenticing students into the unique practices of the different disciplines thus requires teachers to consider the language, skills, and tools needed to successfully master content. As Fang and Coatoam note, “In a disciplinary literacy model, [...] students are expected to use specialized literacy skills, strategies, and practices to engage in disciplinary learning and socialization” (2013). In essence, this model provides students entry into various discourse communities by preparing them for increasing textual, vocabulary and reasoning demands within and across content areas while engaging them “in relevant, authentic learning experiences that

leverage student choice and voice and build on their existing competencies” (Gabrion et al., 2020).

Perhaps most importantly, adopting a disciplinary literacy model of instruction can “enable [students] to better negotiate the literacy demands of their lives” (Rainey et al., 2020), and because of this, disciplinary literacy instruction equitably equips students with the tools necessary for a wide range of pathways. Regardless of which career path students choose, it is essential for them to be thoughtful consumers of information, clear communicators, and creative problem solvers. In this sense, adopting a disciplinary literacy approach is a commitment to equitable education for all students.

Disciplinary Literacy and English Language Arts: A Snapshot

In English Language Arts classes, students can begin the process of learning to think, know, and create in ways similar to journalists, literary scholars, editors, authors, poets, and speech writers—some of the many disciplines embedded within the English Language Arts. Although disciplinary literacy instruction is often situated in secondary classrooms, “even very young children can engage in [...] disciplinary practices and benefit from doing so” (Cervetti, 2021, p. 346). In pre-kindergarten and elementary classrooms, students think, know, and create as they become “published” authors of stories. Whether the writing is interactive or individual, teachers guide these young scribes as they develop characters, settings, and plots and become well-versed in the academic vocabulary of narrative writing. As youth move into the secondary grades, this work becomes more complex and layered as students engage with a wider range of texts and reading and writing practices.

What are some other ways of thinking, knowing, and doing within the disciplines of ELA that students might explore and learn? Rainey et al. (2020) addressed this question with respect to literary analysis and scholarship, looking for patterns of practice in the work of several literary scholars. They found that “[l]iterary scholars seek patterns within and across texts, consider histories of use and other contexts, generate

literary puzzles to pursue, and recursively construct meaning, guided by their goals to develop literary interpretations (Rainey, 2017; Reynolds & Rush, 2017).” In this context, students tackle the work of literary scholars when they search for motifs across text sets and generate their own answers to essential questions. For example, across multiple units, students might explore how different authors use a range of symbols to represent motifs of dualities (e.g., good and evil, life and death) across multiple genres (short story, novel, poem). They then might engage in the development of their own literary work taking up these specific literary practices.

The work of editors, in particular their unique ways of thinking, knowing, and creating in the process of editing, provides additional examples of disciplinary literacy practices that students can explore and develop. For editors, who belong to a discourse community that values organization, precision, and clarity, their ability to evaluate authors’ language in terms of how well it matches the overall purpose of a piece is critical. For example, copy editors for newspapers are (necessarily) sticklers for adherence to style guides and concise language. In contrast, editors of romance novels for a particular publishing house will value descriptive, evocative, and sometimes even “steamy” language. In sum, editors must be masters of matching language to purpose, which is a skill we can develop by offering multiple opportunities for students to craft their own writing and evaluate others’ writing in terms of matching language to purpose.

Educators across Michigan are already engaged in disciplinary literacy practices with varying levels of depth and frequency. For example, we often hear teachers at all levels referring to their students as readers and writers. This approach is essential to developing students’ identities as readers and writers and can begin with our very earliest learners. Another way educators exemplify disciplinary literacy approaches is by highlighting the various career possibilities for students that involve reading and writing, in addition to naming the importance of developing students’ literate identities for pleasure and purpose in adulthood. Finally, English

Language Arts educators are supporting students' literacy development by explicitly naming and modeling the types of knowing, thinking, and doing expected of students within a particular task.

Getting Started with Disciplinary Literacy

Undoubtedly, while some of the above examples will reflect current classroom practices, it is worth noting the abundant materials available to help educators increase the frequency and depth of implementing the ten Essential Instructional Practices. Reading through the English Language Arts section of the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom* is surely the best place to start, but the GELN Disciplinary Literacy Task Force web page offers several additional resources that can support continued investigation, including an Introduction Tool for first time users of the document. The Disciplinary Literacy Task Force also provides inexpensive and, due to the current context, virtual professional learning opportunities. Considered a staple for those entering into this work, the Introductory Institute will be offered multiple times in 2022; it provides participants with a foundational understanding of the *Essential Instructional Practices* document. The Deeper Dive Institute is currently offered once a year and, as its title suggests, invites participants to engage in collaborative inquiry cycles as they further explore the Essential Practices related to problem frames, texts, reading practices, discussion and discourse, and assessment.

In addition, the group offers a course in conjunction with Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) called Disciplinary Literacy for Secondary Leaders (administrators, instructional coaches, and curriculum directors) and a book study for middle school leaders in collaboration with Michigan Elementary and Secondary Principals Association (MEMSPA). The professional learning flyer is available on the Task Force web page for those interested in registering for one or more events, and all educators are encouraged to sign up for our mailing list to receive our quarterly newsletter. Finally, to simply engage in

timely conversations around disciplinary literacy, we urge interested educators to follow us on Twitter (@GELN612Literacy) and to check out our quarterly blog: Exploring Disciplinary Literacy.

Going Further and Sustaining the Work

After preliminary exploration of disciplinary literacy and the *Essential Instructional Practices*, we suggest a few different ways to enhance and sustain disciplinary literacy instruction in classrooms and buildings. Members of the Task Force have participated in book studies that have deepened our own understanding of literacy, instruction, and the systems that support both. ReLeah Lent's (2015) *This Is Disciplinary Literacy: Reading, Writing, Thinking, and Doing... Content Area by Content Area* and *Disciplinary Literacy in Action: How to Create and Sustain a School-Wide Culture of Deep Reading, Writing, and Thinking* (Lent & Voigt, 2018) provide readers with robust examples and pragmatic suggestions for implementation. Similarly, *Investigating Disciplinary Literacy: A Framework for Collaborative Professional Learning* by Dobbs et al. (2017) illustrates the work from a system's perspective. Yet, just like students, teachers need to move from thinking and knowing to *doing*.

As teachers begin to frame units of instruction with real world issues or genuine and engaging questions, they need to consider how texts, language, discussion questions and protocols, writing activities (and more) support students' thinking, knowing, and doing. Beginning with a clear disciplinary focus for the learning is fundamental because "[b]y removing the literacy practice from its disciplinary purpose, it is reduced to a mere exercise" (Rainey et al., 2020). For our youngest students, an investigation of amusement park rides could include texts such as *Mr. Ferris' Wheel*, sketches of new rides, exposure to and practice with content vocabulary, and a letter to an amusement park owner with the description of a new ride. English Language Arts teachers at the secondary level can pose literature-based questions or community-centered issues to give students "compelling reasons" (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2021) for reading, discussing, writing, and creating. For example, a unit on Mary Shelley's

Frankenstein could ask students to consider the ethical limitations of technology. Additional texts, opportunities to collaborate with peers, and a culminating project, such as a formal debate, will broaden students’ understanding of the function of literature in society and give them a purpose for “engag[ing...] in abstract and disciplinary-specific thinking and reasoning” (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2021). When planning for disciplinary-focused lessons and units, teachers at all levels can also consider (a) the cultural, social, and literacy backgrounds of students in their placement classroom; (b) the literacy needs of students based on a

suite of assessments; (c) the concepts and disciplinary knowledge undergirding the focus of the lesson; and (d) the potential literacy challenges posed by their lesson’s focal text(s). (Rainey et al., 2020)

The good news is that teachers’ current written curriculum and resources offer a place to begin—these units and lessons can often be strengthened with a few revisions in order to better support students’ disciplinary literacy skills (see Figure 1) and there are extensive resources available to support disciplinary literacy instruction as well (see Figure 2).

ELA Domain	Content as Originally Framed	Content Framed as Disciplinary Literacy Inquiry
Writing	Argument writing: What is the structure and organization of an argument?	How can we use knowledge of the structure of language to write more persuasively?
Grammar	6-week required unit on standard English grammar	What tools do I have as a writer to ensure my readers clearly understand the ideas I’m communicating?
Literature	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird Unit</i> - Compare the city of Maycomb to the place where you grew up, noting similarities and differences.	What is courage, and who can be courageous? What can this story teach us about tolerance and intolerance?
Poetry	How do you identify a poem? How do you explain a poem?	How can we use poetry to promote social justice in our community?
Literature	How do the characters in a story develop or enhance the theme? How does the conflict of the story develop or enhance the theme? How do the symbols within the story develop or enhance the theme?	To what extent can literature reveal truth?
Literature	Analyze a character in the short story/novel by investigating their thoughts, dialogue, and actions.	How do we make decisions about who we are and who we want to become?

Figure 1. Examples of Curricular Units Reframed with Authentic Problem Frames

Resource	Potential Use
Writing Curriculum - <i>The New York Times</i>	Examples of curricular units focused on writing, annotated mentor texts, authentic purposes for writing, and more.
KQED Learn Discussions	Weekly discussion prompts around engaging topics, which could offer authentic purposes for discussion and writing assignments.
ELA - DLE Resource Hub	Curated resources aligned to the <i>Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy</i> , offered by the GELN Disciplinary Literacy Task Force.

Figure 2. Helpful Resources to Support a Shift Toward Disciplinary Literacy Instruction

Conclusion

Regardless of where one might be on this journey, it is always advantageous to start small. Consider one Essential Practice or one unit of study that, based upon classroom data, needs nurturing. Use the bulleted statements that accompany that particular Practice to bolster instructional moves. Measure the impact of these changes with formative and summative assessments. Make direct connections between student growth in this area to the other Practices. Continue to explicitly name and model disciplinary ways of knowing, thinking, and doing. Most importantly, reach out to us or other members of the Disciplinary Literacy Task Force for support and network with other educators who are also interested in moving toward more authentic, engaging literacy instruction. As Ken Blanchard (2000) states, “None of us is as smart as all of us.” Together, we can support all students in developing their literacy identities and skills in order to make school—indeed, our world—a better place.

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Author Biographies

Dr. Laura Gabrion is a Literacy Consultant at Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency. She is interested in disciplinary literacy pedagogy, writing self-efficacy research and application, and integrating technology to enhance instruction. She can be reached at <gabriol@resa.net>.

Ms. Jenelle Williams is a Literacy Consultant at Oakland Intermediate School District (Oakland Schools). She is interested in adolescent literacy, disciplinary literacy, and culturally sustaining practices. She can be reached at <jenelle.williams@oakland.k12.mi.us>.

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