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# Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy, Grades 6 to 12

by Elizabeth Birr Moje, Ph.D., Darin Stockdill, Ph.D., and Rebekah Hornak



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## **What are the Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy, Grades 6 to 12, and how did they come to be?**

The *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy, Grades 6 to 12*, is a document that outlines sets of instructional practices that can be the focus of teacher professional learning around literacy instruction and learning at the secondary level. These instructional practices, meant to be implemented by teachers at the unit and course level in core content classes in grades 6-12, have the potential to measurably improve content learning and develop important literacy skills in the different core academic disciplines, if implemented consistently.

This collection of essential instructional practices was developed as a key component of the birth-grade 12 vision for literacy instruction set by the General Education Leadership Network (GELN) of the Michigan

Association of Intermediate School Administrators. The birth-grade 12 vision began as a GELN project under the leadership of past director Joanne Hopper, and includes a continuum of support and design around literacy development for the State of Michigan that recognizes that literacy instruction should not stop at the elementary level, as literacy learning is multifaceted and ongoing over the lifespan. The Essential documents, across birth-grade 12, were designed with experts and researchers at the table and created so that each grade band is connected through the sequence while also allowing for age and grade level differentiation.

## **How was this set of Essentials developed?**

This set of Essentials was developed over time with input from a wide range of people. As scholars of disciplinary literacy, we (Elizabeth and Darin) were brought into the project by Dr. Nell Duke, a literacy scholar at the University of Michigan, and Joanne Hopper of GELN, to follow up on their development of the K-3 Essentials, as well as on the development of the Essentials for grades 4-5. Elizabeth developed a list of research-supported practices describing what both teachers and students should be doing in 6-12

classrooms with regards to literacy teaching and learning. Then, after reviewing the K-3 Essentials, she developed an initial draft of the 6-12 document with a similar structure. Dr. Michelle Kwok, another colleague who focuses on disciplinary literacy, then revised the draft further to align it with the structure of the K-3 Essentials, and Darin did an additional round of review and editing. The draft was then shared with stakeholders from intermediate school districts, the Michigan Department of Education, and content-area groups to provide input. Over a year-long series of meetings, the task-force members provided input and revisions which the researchers reviewed and incorporated into the document. The document was then presented to the GELN board who voted to approve it in the late Spring of 2018. The *6-12 Essentials* were then piloted in classrooms across the state during the 2018-2019 school year. Rebekah became involved during this process, and, in collaboration with the researchers, began to develop and coordinate GELN's approach to a statewide rollout.

### **So, what is disciplinary literacy and why does it matter?**

Put simply, disciplinary literacy is the idea that reading, writing, and other text-based practices are unique to the disciplines in which they occur. Put in a more complex way, disciplinary literacy teaching is about ensuring that young people have explicit access to the “ways with words” (Heath, 1983), discourses, and other forms of representation in the different disciplines. Disciplinary literacy instruction is a form of social justice teaching because it ensures that all students have access to the language, skills, and practices necessary for success in the discipline, rather than only those who have the opportunity to apprentice to these disciplinary discourses on a regular basis in their everyday lives (Moje, 2007).

The call to integrate literacy instruction into the various content areas of the secondary schools is not new. Since the early 1900s, educational practitioners, researchers, and policymakers have debated questions about the role of instruction in reading and writing in the secondary school. And for almost 60 years, educators interested

in secondary school literacy have experimented with strategies designed to help students learn to read and write with proficiency in the content areas.

More recently many researchers and policy makers have turned to questions about the role that literacy plays in the in- and out-of-school lives of children and youth. Indeed, recent policy initiatives suggest renewed attention to, and regulation of, students' school-based literacy skills. Although much of the recent legislation has focused on literacy development before third grade, it is likely that the achievement concerns in the upper grades will soon turn policy makers' attention to youth reading and writing across the school day in the middle and high school grades. In too many cases people fall victim to the false belief that young children learn to read in the primary grades and use that reading skill to “read to learn” in the upper grades (Pearson & Cervetti, 2012). Although it is certainly true that we all engage in reading to learn, people—regardless of their age—need to be helped to learn to read when they enter new disciplinary domains with highly specialized language and complex ways of using language. One way to think of the challenge of disciplinary literacy development is that it is much like entering a new culture. When we enter a new culture, it's always easier to navigate when longtime members of the culture cue us into the specialized ways of speaking, reading, writing, and doing things in that culture. Disciplinary domains are like cultures and teachers of the disciplines are the longtime members who guide us into them (Moje, 2015).

Recognizing that literacy is an essential aspect of disciplinary learning requires that we accept the central idea that disciplines cannot exist without both oral and written language (O'Brien, Moje, & Stewart, 2001). This premise assumes that generating new ideas and knowledge in a discipline requires fluency in making and interrogating knowledge claims, which in turn requires fluency in a wide range of ways of constructing and communicating knowledge. When thought of in this way, literacy is an essential and central aspect of disciplinary practice and learning, rather than a set of strategies or tools brought into the disciplines to improve reading and writing of subject-matter texts.

**Why are there different sets of practices?**

Disciplinary literacy suggests that a person who has learned deeply in a discipline can use the range of representational forms—most notably reading and writing of written texts, but also oral language, visual images, music, or artistic representations—that are most valued in a given discipline to communicate their learning, synthesize ideas across texts and people, express new ideas, and to question and challenge ideas most valued in the discipline. For students to learn those disciplinary literacies, teachers and policy makers have to acknowledge that although the different disciplines—and school subject areas—have many similarities, they also have discipline-specific ways of doing things.

The 6-12 grade Literacy Essentials are based on the idea that the disciplines themselves consist of domain-specific, or cultural, practices and can be considered discourse communities that students must navigate.

The natural and social sciences, for example, base their claims on empirical data that they collect from carefully designed and managed studies. The natural sciences (e.g., chemistry) may require learners to simulate in experimental conditions phenomena occurring in the natural world, whereas the social sciences (e.g., history) may demand that learners seek and pore through artifacts of a particular social and historical phenomenon. Mathematical and literary studies, in contrast, tend to be text-dependent, requiring close textual reading (e.g., generating and proving in geometry) and interpretation (e.g., analyses of literacy devices, historical contexts, and author’s intentions in literacy works).

Most importantly, these differences are best understood by those teachers most practiced in the disciplines and subject areas, rather than by teachers who are experts in literacy and linguistics; who can offer helpful strategies for supporting and scaffolding students as they navigate these differences, but who may themselves be unaware of them.

**Who is the primary audience for this set of Essential practices?**

This set of Essential Practices has multiple intended audiences over time. Right now, we are focusing on dissemination and development work with instructional

leaders, primarily consultants who work in intermediate school districts (ISD) or regional service centers, and some ISDs are taking the work up with teachers and administrators in districts they serve. Our early efforts are to get the document and complementary training to the people who develop much of the professional learning opportunities for teachers.

We want teachers to engage with the sets of practices as well, but we also want to make sure that teachers get the support and time they need to understand the practices before they are expected to implement them. We want to make sure that these sets of practices do not become a laundry list of things teachers are expected to do, but rather a resource that instructional leaders and teachers can turn to in order to help guide and develop meaningful professional learning experiences across content areas.

**What are the big ideas behind the 10 Essential Practices?**

The big ideas behind the 10 Essential Practices are actually pretty simple.

First, the focus is on disciplinary learning, not on literacy learning. That said, because disciplines cannot exist without language, and disciplines have special ways of using language that are aligned with how people think and act in the discipline, it is essential for teachers to scaffold students’ learning of those reading and writing practices.

Second, scaffolding disciplinary reading and writing means that the texts of the disciplines must be used on a regular basis. We must underscore that text does not mean textbook, and disciplinary texts can be many different things, from charts and graphs, to maps and music scores, to photographs and advertisements, and more. Texts are not only made of alphabetic print, although helping readers of all ages grapple with the specialized words and discourses of the disciplines, while also learning how to read other forms of representation (e.g., numbers, symbols, and images), is central to using learning how to read disciplinary texts.

Third, disciplinary literacy instruction is rooted in the practices of the discipline, such as natural science investigations, textual interpretation, historical inquiry, or mathematical proving. In all cases, disciplines begin with questions, problems, or puzzles to solve and literacy is used to engage in inquiry and to communicate ideas. From a disciplinary literacy perspective, reading and writing are not engaged as ends in themselves; literacy is meant to do the work of the disciplines.

Fourth, disciplinary literacy instruction is for all students, not just honors or advanced placement students. Engaging all students in the practices of the disciplines gives reading and writing the purpose they need and thus stimulate motivation and engagement. Disciplinary literacy instruction is about access and only serves the goal of socially just teaching if it provides access to all students. Disciplinary literacy is critical literacy instruction because it enables all students to have access to the codes of power in the disciplines.

Finally, a key idea is that the 10 Essential Practices should be woven throughout disciplinary units of study so that students are experiencing at least some of these teaching practices every day as they learn disciplinary subject matter.

#### **How do the different sets of practices align with the content expectations for different content areas?**

The Essential Practices were written and revised in order to clearly and openly align with the different sets of content expectations that teachers have in the different content areas. In many cases, language from different sets of content expectations is directly referenced in the Essentials. Science teachers will immediately see connections to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS Lead States, 2013), especially the science and engineering practices. Math teachers will see state standards for mathematical practices directly referenced. ELA teachers will find that they align very well, and even extend, the Common Core anchor standards (National Governor's Association, 2010) for reading, writing, speaking and listening, etc. Similarly, Social Studies teachers will see connections to the C3 Framework (National Council for the Social Studies,

2013) that helped to shape the newly approved Social Studies standards that have a stronger focus on inquiry learning and literacy practices. The Essential practices are what teachers can do to meet the other sets of expectations. They don't replace them or even compete with them.

#### **How should this document be used?**

First and foremost, the document should be used as a guide for all educators to transform literacy instruction and learning at the 6-12 grade levels by helping to inform meaningful and research supported professional learning around literacy instruction. For content experts and consultants, they should utilize the Essentials to develop the understanding of teachers and administrators around disciplinary literacy and disciplinary literacy instruction at the secondary level. Administrators should allow the contents of the document to be used to assist in the development of a vision of literacy for their secondary buildings. Finally, teachers should use the practices within their classrooms to inform the design of units of instruction to transform learning and disciplinary literacy development. It is not a list of literacy strategies for teachers, but rather a repository of approaches that teachers across the curriculum can explore and use to improve disciplinary instruction and literacy learning.

#### **How can our readers learn more?**

For more information on the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy, Grades 6-12*, or additional Essentials documents, we recommend that readers visit [www.literacyessentials.org](http://www.literacyessentials.org). The site contains the continuum of Essential documents, as well as the additional resources available for readers to read and review. In addition, as professional learning opportunities are being developed across the state, educators should reach out to their regional ISD/RESA to discuss how they can learn more.

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## Author Biographies

**Dr. Elizabeth Birr Moje** is dean for the School of Education at the University of Michigan, the George Herbert Mead Collegiate Professor of Education, and an Arthur F. Thurnau Professor in the School of Education. She is also a faculty associate in the Institute for Social Research and in the Latino/a Studies program. Dr. Moje began her career teaching history, biology, and drama at high schools in Colorado and Michigan. In her current research and community engagement work, Dr. Moje uses an array of methods to study and support young people's literacy learning in Detroit, MI. She can be reached at [moje@umich.edu](mailto:moje@umich.edu).

**Dr. Darin Stockdill** has over 25 years of experience as an educator and has been a secondary English and Social Studies teacher, an educational researcher, a teacher educator, and a curriculum developer. As the Instructional and Program Design Coordinator for at the Center for Education Design, Evaluation, and Research (CEDER) at the University of Michigan, Dr. Stockdill manages a range of instructional design projects and collaborates with other educators to design innovative learning experiences and resources. He can be reached at [daristoc@umich.edu](mailto:daristoc@umich.edu).

**Rebekah Hornak** is the Director of Instructional Services at the Saginaw Intermediate School District. She has also been a K-12 Curriculum Director, Principal, Assistant Principal, and Athletic Director. In her current role as the Director of Instructional Services, Rebekah is responsible for a wide variety of programs that impact various demographics throughout the county. Her personal goal is to empower every educator in the county one step at a time. Rebekah holds a Bachelor Degree from Central Michigan University in History and English with an emphasis in secondary teaching and a master's degree from Central Michigan University in School Principalship. She can be reached at [rhornak@sisd.cc](mailto:rhornak@sisd.cc).

