

Getting Started With Disciplinary Literacy: Five Considerations

Nearly all states have recently adopted educational standards that require the teaching of literacy in the disciplines ([science](#), [history](#), [mathematics](#)) in grades 6–12. This requirement has made way for a new model known as [disciplinary literacy](#). Disciplinary literacy refers to the specialized ways one understands and communicates in various disciplines. Within Disciplinary Literacy there is an understanding that reading, writing, thinking, reasoning and doing within each discipline is unique. Educational leaders understand that each discipline communicates, and evaluates knowledge differently. This central belief honors the expertise of content-area teachers who may otherwise have been resistant to the literacy “push”. The disciplinary literacy model integrates literacy into content, which meets the intent of the state standards, as well as the goals of the teachers.

Effective Integration of New Standards

Disciplinary literacy is the way to meet the needs of students learning disciplinary-specific content as well as addressing the specific demands of the [Common Core State Standards \(CCSS\)](#). Central to the CCSS and disciplinary literacy is the goal that students be prepared for the work world, higher education, and civic and community life when they graduate 12th grade. Both disciplinary literacy and the CCSS call for deeper learning for students, focusing on application through critical thinking, higher order thinking and rigor. Disciplinary literacy also partners well with [21st Century Learning](#) initiatives and The [Next Generation Science Standards](#). Rather than viewing disciplinary literacy as a standalone practice, or another box to check, educators should view it as a structure that can tie many of their current goals together, while also providing high-quality instruction and learning experiences for students.

Disciplinary Literacy vs. Content Area Literacy

Disciplinary literacy is not simply the new name for content area reading. Content area reading focuses on applying reading skills and strategies to the disciplines. With content area literacy, reading is central—and disciplinary content is what the students read in an attempt to better comprehend. With disciplinary literacy, the discipline is at the center, and reading and literacy promote the conventions of the discipline. Understanding the distinction between content area and disciplinary literacy is important for content area teachers. One of the two practices does not replace the other; rather they serve two different purposes of student learning and interaction with texts and content. Literacy experts Tim and Cyndie Shanahan have done a great deal of work around disciplinary literacy. [Tim's blog](#) is full of great information, and offers discussion around content area reading versus disciplinary literacy.

Five Important Considerations:

1. INQUIRY

[Inquiry](#)-based instruction, advocated by both 21st Century Learning Initiatives and the CCSS, is at the center of disciplinary practice. This active form of learning aids students in remembering and understanding information in a way that goes far beyond memorizing. Solving challenging problems, asking questions and thinking about what and why one knows what he/she knows are part of an inquiry based environment. Creating a culture of inquiry in the classroom helps develop students who are not only habitual inquirers, but students who are intrinsically motivated as they become more involved in their own learning.

2. DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC PRACTICES

At the heart of disciplinary literacy, teachers must understand the key habits of practice used by disciplinary experts within their respective disciplines. Together, teachers and students can ask and identify: what are the unique texts and text features central to the discipline, what are the specialized approaches to reading and writing used by subject area experts in the field, and how is language used within the discipline? Understanding the

traditional definition of these words and concepts is still important, but with a disciplinary literacy approach, students will also understand how those words and concepts are used to communicate within the discipline.

3. CONNECTIONS TO THE REAL WORLD: ACCESS TO EXPERTS

Connecting students to the outside world—to disciplinary experts within the community—is central to disciplinary literacy. Together, teachers and students can identify local community members who may be willing to bring their expertise into the classroom. Connecting with the community takes learning beyond the building and makes connections with the real world, making learning authentic and purposeful. Students develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for what is taking place in the classroom, preparing them for life outside of school.

4. TEACHER AS FACILITATOR & STUDENT OWNERS

In the traditional classroom model, the teacher is the owner of the knowledge, and the students are passive participants. Within the disciplinary literacy classroom, the teacher takes on the role of facilitator, allowing students to be more involved in their own learning. The shift to facilitator creates a whole new student-teacher relationship, which models more of the working relationships students will encounter in the real world. Students become agents of their own learning as they take ownership of the projects they are working on. Classrooms where the teacher is a facilitator are environments where conversations are lively and open, everyone is equally valued and important, and learning from each other is normal practice.

5. TEXT

State standards explicitly reference the importance of using a variety of text types. Integration and discussion around multiple texts promotes higher-order thinking as students are able to synthesize information from various [sources](#). Classrooms implementing a disciplinary literacy approach integrate multiple sources of information and texts, including multimodal texts. Using multiple texts allows for student choice, increases student engagement, and promotes discussion throughout. Thanks to the internet, accessing a variety of sources is now easier than

ever as students engage with maps, art work, videos, cartoons, speeches, and more.

Getting Started with Disciplinary Literacy

To get started with disciplinary literacy in your classroom or school, start small. Consider bringing students into the process of selecting multiple texts to pair with the text you currently use. Invite a professional from the community to come in and share his/her experiences with the class. Begin to reflect on what makes reading and understanding information in your content area unique. Remember, you are attempting to help students identify discipline-specific ways of thinking and acting. As you get started, take a look at the [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's website](#) as this institution has accomplished a great deal of work around disciplinary literacy.

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