



DELICATE LAYERS *of* LEARNING

ACHIEVING DISCIPLINARY LITERACY REQUIRES CONTINUOUS, COLLABORATIVE ADJUSTMENT

By **Jacy Ippolito, Christina L. Dobbs, Megin Charner-Laird, & Joshua F. Lawrence**

For middle and high school teachers facing the challenge of implementing the Common Core State Standards, disciplinary literacy instruction is a critical element — and one for which many are unprepared.

Disciplinary literacy focuses attention on the reading, writing, and communication skills unique to each discipline (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Students need to become literate in discipline-specific ways, but most secondary teachers have had little or no explicit training in disciplinary literacy instruction techniques.

For the past five years, we — a team of instructional coaches, university consultants, and professors teaching courses in adolescent literacy, instructional coaching, and teacher leadership — have learned a great deal about the possibilities and pitfalls of supporting middle and high school teachers' professional learning about disciplinary literacy instruction. We have made mistakes, wrestled with complexity, and learned many lessons from teachers and students as we work with them to understand what disciplinary literacy instruction means in each content area.

This article summarizes some of what we have learned about the delicate endeavor of working across content

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areas, across grade levels, and supporting content-area teachers (experts in their respective domains) in tackling the difficult yet rewarding work of enacting disciplinary literacy.

One of our own mentors used to push us to consider how our thinking changed over time, using the now-familiar “I used to think ... now I think ...” format. We use this framing here to describe our most important learnings about helping teachers learn about and implement disciplinary literacy. Importantly, many of our insights have come directly from our collaborating teachers as they have shared their reflections, struggles, and triumphs.

1 We used to think that disciplinary literacy professional development was just about learning to marry content and literacy practices.

Now we think that disciplinary literacy professional development must pay equal attention to the “what” and “how” of marrying content and literacy instruction through sophisticated collaborative learning systems, such as professional learning communities (PLCs) and inquiry cycles.

We have found that it is just as important to build teachers’ capacity to work with and learn from each other as it is to introduce new ways of thinking about merging content and literacy practices (Ippolito, 2013; Ippolito, Dobbs, & Charner-Laird, 2014; Charner-Laird, Ippolito, & Dobbs, 2014). In fact, we have seen repeatedly that guidance from a trusted teacher leader is key to colleagues’ engagement, learning, inquiry, and changes in practice.

One high-leverage approach to disciplinary literacy professional learning uses discipline-specific PLCs led by designated teacher leaders and focused on collaborative inquiry cycles investigating new disciplinary literacy instructional practices (Ippolito et al., 2014).

2 We used to think that literacy coaches were best positioned to lead disciplinary literacy professional development.

Now we think that, while coaches can be supportive and effective, most secondary schools benefit greatly when supporting teacher leaders as drivers of disciplinary literacy efforts.

While literacy coaches have been shown to be effective in large, systemic literacy professional learning endeavors in elementary schools (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010), coaching in secondary contexts can be more challenging. At these levels, curricular design decisions need to take into account both content-specific objectives and discipline-specific reading challenges to a greater degree than in earlier grades.

Teacher leaders, who carry content-area expertise, are better positioned to “lead from within,” as one of our teachers put it, serving in the role of leader and learner simultaneously (Charner-Laird et al., 2014). Content-area expertise, coupled with a willingness to learn alongside team members, helps to create buy-in and a sense of shared purpose among members of each disciplinary team.

Drawing on and leveraging the expertise that

already exists within departments or teams, in conjunction with support in facilitation and leadership, helps teacher leaders to facilitate meetings in which teachers engage in creative, adaptive conversations about how best to enact new disciplinary literacy routines.

3 We used to think that learning about disciplinary literacy was largely a technical process of adopting specific disciplinary literacy strategies.

Now we think that learning about and implementing disciplinary literacy is largely an adaptive and iterative process of continually and collaboratively tweaking and tinkering as well as layering intermediate and disciplinary practices.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) describe different sorts of challenges: technical challenges, in which solutions are known and must be implemented, and deeper adaptive challenges, requiring new solutions and shifts in beliefs and habits. Across our projects, with districts both large and small, nearly all teachers enter with the notion that we (as outside consultants) will provide clear, technical answers about how to implement disciplinary literacy.

We used to think that, too, to a certain extent. We used to share, a bit naively, sets of strategies about teaching vocabulary or close reading, without much conversation about how these strategies were simply examples. The best strategies were likely ones that didn't exist yet.

As teachers shared their expertise with us over time, we began to see that much about disciplinary literacy instruction was still to be invented and adapted from older ideas of literacy instruction. Much of the expertise for that invention lives within content-area teachers themselves. It does not take long for participants to realize that

the best results do not come from prepackaged strategies and routines, but instead come from collaborative conversations within and across content areas.

This switch in focus, from searching for “silver bullets” (Rotberg, 2014) to collaboratively inventing new practices, is a classic example of an adaptive change that requires new ways of thinking and working. Furthermore, focusing exclusively on discipline-specific literacy practices (e.g. identifying bias and sourcing in history) robs teachers and students of rich, responsive instruction that makes use of general, or intermediate, literacy strategies (e.g. summarizing, visualizing, and inferring).

Adapting our own work in response to what we have seen

in effective classrooms, we now believe the best disciplinary literacy professional learning and instruction responds to students' needs and carefully layers intermediate and disciplinary literacy strategies. Teachers who have begun to teach with awareness of this layering effect have found great success in meeting students' needs while simultaneously moving toward disciplinary literacy practices.

4 We used to think that we knew what secondary teachers needed to learn in order to effectively enact disciplinary literacy.

Now we think that all effective disciplinary literacy professional learning must begin with a needs assessment designed to reveal teachers' and students' current thinking and practices.

All too often, professional development has little connection to what teachers and students at a particular site really need most. Using free, online teacher and student assessments of beliefs and practices about literacy instruction can go a long way in the design and implementation of disciplinary literacy professional learning.

The Content Area Literacy Survey (CALs) is a tool that helps secondary schools pinpoint their needs before co-designing a professional learning project (see <http://adlitpd.org/category/assess>). It also becomes a starting point for collaborative design conversations. Additionally, teacher and student needs change and emerge along the way. By following the lead of teachers engaged in the work of developing new practices, we can develop responsive professional learning as initiatives progress.

5 We used to think that disciplinary literacy professional development was best delivered through intensive institutes.

Now we think that the best disciplinary literacy professional learning occurs over time, including a blend of summer, online, and school-year team-based experiences.

We have been invited by districts to offer stand-alone summer workshops. We have also been invited to conduct yearlong embedded coaching sessions only. Often, finances and traditional school schedules, rather than research and best practices, guide decisions about the timing and format of professional learning.

While both approaches have benefits and drawbacks, shifting teachers' beliefs and practices often requires a combination of formats. Coupled with the ongoing collaborative model mentioned earlier (PLCs, led by teacher leaders, focused on cycles of inquiry), we have found that schools often require, at minimum, a three-day summer

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DISCIPLINARY LITERACY IN ACTION

A team of six Spanish teachers from Brookline High School in Massachusetts taught a range of introductory, intermediate, and advanced Spanish courses. This group initially characterized its work as building a solid foundation in Spanish oral language, with students learning over time to read complex texts in Spanish. As part of our disciplinary literacy professional learning project, one of the team's goals was to help students reach higher levels of proficiency in Spanish.

The Spanish team's initial way of thinking emphasized the need to help students decode

Spanish words and increase oral and reading fluency. However, team members quickly chose to focus on being more explicit in their classes about the range of "habits of mind" that language learners must adopt in order to effectively read, write, and communicate in Spanish. In a professional learning community, facilitated by a teacher leader, the group then engaged in collaborative conversations about the habits of mind it deemed most critical.

Ultimately, the team agreed on a short list of habits it wanted to foster, created in response to state and national world language standards, literacy materials from our initial summer institute, and



Use your bicultural vision. It's a habit of mind that a team of high school teachers determined is key to learning Spanish.

members' experiences as language learners and teachers.

Members cited persistence in tackling Spanish texts as one foundational habit, as they sometimes saw students giving up in Spanish class. Other habits of mind included: finding the

words you need, checking your understanding, and making connections and comparisons. The list also included more discipline-specific habits, such as "use your bicultural vision," prompting students to note similarities and differences between Spanish-speaking cultures and their own.

Team members described and modeled their list of habits in their classrooms, asking students to write reflections after class activities about which "habits" they thought had been successfully adopted. Ultimately, the team observed students using these habits independently over time as they acquired cultural and literacy knowledge in Spanish.

institute, followed by several online webinar sessions and a handful of "check-ins" in person throughout a school year, to create a robust and strategic approach to disciplinary literacy professional learning. This approach also has an explicit focus on building internal capacity to continue the learning over time.

6 We used to think that researchers had arrived at the most effective approaches to professional development.

Now we still think that professional learning must be responsive to the needs of teachers and students in a specific context — as noted by researchers (Borko, 2004; Bryk, 2015; Elmore, 2004).

But we have also learned that the ideal approach to disciplinary literacy professional learning is beyond "context-specific" and could actually be characterized as "context-emergent," as the ideas for approaching disciplinary literacy instruction arise from teachers themselves, aided by the information, supports, and guidance provided along the way.

Locating the wisdom regarding problems of practice within the very group of teachers struggling with that problem has

been a shift in our perspective as we have seen the powerful ways that new information, coupled with team-based inquiry led by teacher leaders, can lead to insightful, thoughtful, "just-right" approaches to professional learning.

PUTTING OUR NEW LEARNING INTO PRACTICE

Having learned a great deal from our K-12 district partners, we have hit on a model for disciplinary literacy professional learning that appears to be shifting teachers' thinking and practice. We believe that explicit professional development about disciplinary literacy has some power for helping teachers become aware of disciplinary literacy and begin implementing it.

However, we have also seen tools that increase collaborative capacity, such as PLCs and a focus on inquiry cycles, which increase teacher engagement. The powerful combination of content and process leads to inventive and invested participation in implementing disciplinary literacy in a variety of classrooms.

Building and supporting structures that focus on content and process simultaneously is neither simple nor quick. In our most effective partnerships, we have done the work by cycling through three phases over time: assessment, collaboration, and evaluation.

We begin with a needs-assessment process, ideally of both

teachers' and students' understandings of literacy teaching and learning. We often employ the Content Area Literacy Survey (CALs) as an expedient way to gather information.

We then engage in one or more collaborative design conversations, ideally with a team of teachers and administrators in the partner school or district. These collaborative conversations are essential for building understanding of the adaptive nature of this work. We disabuse participants of the notion that we are going to come in with lists of simple strategies for them to implement immediately and flawlessly. Schools and districts also realize through these conversations that a number of pieces need to be put into place before jumping into a disciplinary literacy professional learning initiative.

Then we offer professional development for teachers on key ideas in literacy at a time when teachers have space to do some extensive learning. This often occurs during the summer for several days. We focus on how foundational ideas, such as vocabulary instruction or academic discussions, can be inventively applied in content-area classrooms in general and discipline-specific ways to encourage content learning. We ask that some teachers be willing during these sessions, and beyond, to serve as teacher leaders to facilitate conversations and help colleagues process learning over time.

Following this initial work, we set dates during the school year to continue the conversation, through webinars and in person, to support teachers and teacher leaders as they work in teams. We encourage school leaders to set dates when teachers and teacher leaders within and across content-area teams can share the products of their inquiry cycles and compare notes about how disciplinary literacy instruction is taking shape across content areas. Importantly, the best work takes place in schools where teams of content-area teachers are given time and administrative support to meet regularly between consultant visits in order to push the work forward.

Finally, whenever feasible, we assess teachers' learning through a series of teacher interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and short reflective writings. This gives us a snapshot of how teachers' thinking and practice shifts over time.

Designing and engaging in disciplinary literacy professional learning requires us to continually revise our own thinking about how best to support a wide range of teachers and leaders. At the end of a project, we sometimes find ourselves somewhere we did not expect, with teachers who have invented and adapted practices we had never imagined. And we continue to learn that what works for one site may not work for another.

We must remain open to the possibility that different schools and disciplinary teams will need different professional

learning experiences. The model described here is flexible enough to allow a great deal of tailoring for specific schools and teams, while also allowing us to follow research and best practice guidelines. But much like the teachers with whom we work, we are continually learning.

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- Jacy Ippolito (jacy.ippolito@salemstate.edu) is an associate professor at Salem State University. Christina L. Dobbs (cdobbs@bu.edu) is a clinical assistant professor at Boston University. Megin Charner-Laird (mcharnerlaird@salemstate.edu) is an assistant professor at Salem State University. Joshua Fahey Lawrence (jflawren@uci.edu) is an assistant professor at University of California, Irvine. ■**

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