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Lift Every (Student) Voice with the Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy

by Jennelle Williams and Laura Gabrion



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The 2020-2021 school year will be remembered for many things. In the educational community, one such thing is the incredible challenge posed by remote and hybrid learning. Comments like “You’re muted” and “I have a bad connection” resulted in fragmented conversations. Researchers are just now starting to investigate the repercussions of these stunted discussions, where multiple people might talk at the same time, students might only respond in the chat or, even worse, no one would talk at all. For those students who did not engage in any kind of remote or hybrid learning, the impact of this isolation may have long-term implications as well.

Commitment to Student Voice as a Way to Heal and Reconnect

Therefore, as we (hope to) slowly return to in-school instruction, it will be paramount to “cultivate supportive environments” that nurture strong relationships (Darling-Hammond, Schachner & Edgerton, 2020). According to Learning for Justice (2016),

Social and emotional safety is the cornerstone of positive classroom outcomes. Research shows that students need to feel both physically and emotionally safe to learn. Students experiencing trauma,

including bias, bullying and social isolation, are more likely to feel unsafe.

The Essential Schoolwide Practices in Disciplinary Literacy highlight the need for an organizational climate that “is emotionally and physically safe” (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2020), and this is necessary in individual classrooms as well. To establish a connected community of learners, we need to consider students’ individual identities and how they contribute to the collective personality of the classroom. Dr. Gholdy Muhammad explains, “When youths have a strong sense of their own histories and identities, it becomes a refuge or a protection” (as cited in Ferlazzo, 2020). Identity-building can forge a culture of trust in which students have empathy and understanding for others, expanding opportunities for them to engage in deep discussions in a space where their voices matter.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) has been instrumental in thinking about the connections between health and education for many years, and their Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model provides a series of tenets that allow educators to reflect on the extent

to which students feel healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged in their school settings (2015). The WSCC model is now an essential component of Michigan's Continuous Improvement Process (MICIP), so it is expected that the WSCC model tenets will hold greater prominence in school- and district-improvement conversations over the next few years.

Given this context and as we begin a school year that is likely to present a new set of pandemic-related challenges, members of Michigan's Disciplinary Literacy Task Force wondered how taking up disciplinary literacy practices might intersect with this whole-child approach. During the 2020-2021 school year, Jenelle Williams, along with members of Oakland Schools' Leadership and Continuous Improvement Unit, dug deeply into the WSCC tenets and indicators. Our hunch was that there would be many connections, and our work together to elaborate this series of connections hunch proved our hunch to be correct. Figure 1 on the next page shows some of the results of our investigations.

ASCD's WSCC model tenets focus on learner-centered approaches in schools, as does the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework. CASEL's framework "takes a systemic approach that emphasizes the importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating practices across key settings of *classrooms, schools, families, and communities* to enhance all students' social, emotional, and academic learning" (emphasis in original). Schools that are focusing on learner-centered approaches will find that, while the terminology may differ at times, both areas of work prioritize the well-being needs of learners in order to support high academic achievement and wellness.

Connecting the Dots: Engagement, SEL, Equity, and Student Discourse

As we re-engage students in face-to-face learning this school year, it will be essential for educators to intentionally rebuild community, teach in equitable ways, and attend to students' social emotional learning. Structuring effective peer-to-peer discourse can be

the glue that holds this plan together. The *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12* can support individual teacher reflection and planning, as well as schoolwide conversations, about nurturing academic discourse and attending to the whole child. For instance, in the English Language Arts section, Practice 5 calls for teachers to support "higher order discussion of increasingly complex text across varying participation structures." This general idea is explicated further with these specific instructional moves in which a teacher:

- establishes compelling reasons for engaging in discussion of text, including texts produced by students.
- allocates time for whole-group, small-group, and paired discussions of text, and uses a range of grouping and discussion strategies (e.g. Socratic seminars, jigsaw, etc.), including face-to-face and online formats.
- has students use appropriate evidence from the text to support claims in discussion.
- poses questions that foster textual understanding and deep engagement with text, as well as development of critical viewing and critical reading of diverse texts (including visual texts).
- provides modeling and instruction to teach students how to generate their own higher-level questions about texts (e.g., appraises, assesses, or critiques on a basis of specific standards and criteria).
- teaches students how to engage in productive discussions, including discussion moves appropriate to ELA (e.g., discussing a text from different perspectives, identifying and discussing an author's use of literary devices, identifying rhetorical moves in a model text).
- offers opportunities for dramatic interpretations of literature.
- engages students in discussions around how words, sentence structures, and the organization of texts are used to convey concepts and messages in both nonfiction and fiction texts.
- asks students to identify similar themes, characters, conflicts, linguistic features, plot structures,

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2	Safe	7. Our school teaches, models, and provides opportunities to practice social-emotional skills, including effective listening, conflict resolution, problem solving, personal reflection and responsibility, and ethical decision making.	DL Essential Practices 5 and 6 center on supporting effective speaking and listening behaviors among students.
2	Safe	8. Our school upholds social justice and equity concepts and practices mutual respect for individual differences at all levels of school interactions—student-to-student, adult-to-student, and adult-to-adult.	The DL Essential Practices document has been revised to include intentional connections to culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy.
3	Engaged	1. Our teachers use active learning strategies, such as cooperative learning and project-based learning.	DL Essential Practice 1 centers on project/problem/inquiry-based approaches.
3	Engaged	2. Our school offers a range of opportunities for students to contribute to and learn within the community at large, including service learning, internships, apprenticeships, and volunteer projects.	DL Essential Practice 9 centers on community networking and includes opportunities for students to engage with the community and vice versa.
3	Engaged	7. Our teachers use a range of inquiry-based, experiential learning tasks and activities to help all students deepen their understanding of what they are learning and why they are learning it.	DL Essential Practice 1 centers on project/problem/inquiry-based approaches.
3	Engaged	8. Our staff works closely with students to help them monitor and direct their own progress.	DL Essential Practice 8 centers on ongoing observation and assessment of students' literacy development in all content areas. Research supports the use of effective feedback, reflection, and goal-setting practices.
4	Supported	2. Our teachers use a range of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment tasks to monitor student progress, provide timely feedback, and adjust teaching-learning activities to maximize student progress.	DL Essential Practice 8 centers on ongoing observation and assessment of students' literacy development in all content areas. Research supports the use of effective feedback, reflection, and goal-setting practices.
5	Challenged	4. Our curriculum, instruction, and assessment demonstrate high expectations for each student.	All of the DL Essential Practices are built on a framework of apprenticing students into the ways of thinking and communicating within each discipline. This inherently communicates high expectations, as students are expected to engage in authentic work and express their learning to authentic audiences for real purposes.
5	Challenged	8. Our curriculum and instruction develop students' global awareness and competencies, including understanding of language and culture.	DL Essential Practice 10 centers on metalinguistic awareness, otherwise known as talking about talk. This Essential Practice details ways teachers can help students understand the connection between language and culture within (and across) disciplines.
	Sustainability	4. Our school uses a balanced approach to formative and summative assessments that provide reliable, developmentally appropriate information about student learning.	DL Essential Practice 8 centers on ongoing observation and assessment of students' literacy development in all content areas. Research supports the use of effective feedback, reflection, and goal-setting practices.

Figure 1. Disciplinary Literacy and WSCC Program Intersections

and text structures among different texts and seek connections, analogies, and patterns.

- supports students' knowledge and criticality of historical, social, political, and psychological issues with texts considering various disciplinary and cultural perspectives.
- engages students in discussion around digital and media literacies, and engages students in dialogue through digital tools to share and communicate ideas with text, speech, and visualization.

Getting to the “How” with Student Discourse

So, how specifically can classroom discourse support student well-being, engagement, and accelerated learning? According to Hess & Gong (2014), “Collaboration and teamwork can be powerful instructional vehicles for learning and support creative thinking. When small, collaborative groups take on a challenging task, they can understand more complex material, engage with content more deeply, and learn at a faster pace” (as cited in Hess, 2018). In addition, by moving away from teacher-centered instruction, we encourage student autonomy and self-efficacy. The process, however, takes time. For example, we must establish and model routines by giving students specific roles and responsibilities, such as recorder, reporter, timekeeper, and taskmaster, amongst others. As Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2021), explain in *The Distance Learning Playbook*, it is also important to establish working agreements for small groups; these agreements need to be explicitly taught, convey high expectations and mutual respect, and acknowledge the learning needs of all students. Co-establishing these agreements emphasizes collaborative spirit as well as equity of voice. Structured protocols, such as “Think-Pair-Share,” the “Socratic Seminar,” and the “Fish-bowl” can each be enhanced through talk stems that embolden students to respectfully agree and/or disagree with their peers' thoughts and observations. We can maintain expectations by providing opportunities for whole group debriefing and by observing and assessing students' learning as they engage in collaborative discussions. These considerations help us support equity in small group settings and promote the myriad benefits of collaborative learning.

The suggestions offered above are indeed helpful, but they may fall flat in the classroom without a meaningful, engaging reason for discourse to occur. Bullet 1 in Practice 5 calls for teachers to “establish compelling reasons for engaging in discussion of text, including texts produced by students.” In other words, dialogue must begin with a question worth asking – one that students can connect to their learning and their lives. Examples in English Language Arts classrooms might include conceptual questions such as the following: “How can we use poetry to promote social justice in our community?” or “To what extent can literature reveal truth?” Other possible discussion prompts may relate to current events. Many free, high-quality ideas are available through the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP) website, including Word Generation materials.

Once a meaningful question for discussion is raised, teachers must intentionally select texts (visual, audio, and print) that will allow students to deepen their understanding and the level of conversation. To scaffold students' understanding, teachers can model (and offer multiple opportunities to practice) the process of asking and answering text-dependent questions. Fisher et. al. (2015) suggest the following questions:

- What does the text say? (general understandings and key details)
- How does the text work? (vocabulary, structure, and author's craft)
- What does the text mean? (logical inferences and intertextual connections)
- What does the text inspire you to do? (write, investigate, present, debate)

We offer an extension: in our opinion, the last question is at the heart of our work around the Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy: “What does this text inspire you to do?” We aim to help our students find their voice in meaningful ways this school year, and always. As we re-engage students in learning this fall, let us consider it an opportunity to reconsider our purpose. Instead of getting back to normal, let us get “back to better” (Minor & Hicks, 2020) by elevating student voice and empowering our students with the tools to use their voices--both in our classrooms and beyond.

Through this approach, we will be one step closer to making schools a place where students feel safe, healthy, engaged, challenged, and supported, all the while improving their literacy skills as well.

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