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The Importance of Disciplinary Literacy

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What does it mean to read, write, think, and communicate like a scientist? What about as a historian, writer, musician, artist, engineer, or mathematician? In today's diverse and global world, these are questions secondary teachers and their students should be considering. Doing so supports students' literacy, learning, and ability to more readily engage in the disciplines they study

(Moje, 2008). These considerations also serve to develop teachers' instruction so they can apprentice students to negotiate and create texts in discipline-specific ways (Brozo, Moorman, Meyer, & Stewart, 2013).

Within the traditional, silo-structure of secondary schools, students navigate hour-by-hour a curriculum featuring dis-

tinct texts from varying disciplines. This requires students to become a variety of readers, writers, and performers (Gee, 2000). For example, within an English classroom, students will read and write narratives, poetry, and play scripts, be expected to read and perform musical scores in their orchestra classroom, and understand and generate art in their art class. Additionally, secondary students will read and write about scientifically-based phenomena in their science classroom, navigate primary and secondary sources in their history classroom, and perform and explain mathematical computations in their math classroom.

Disciplinary literacy requires students to read and write in specialized ways for specialized purposes determined by the discipline (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Each discipline requires students to employ particular knowledge, tools, and abilities to communicate, create, and use information within that discipline (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Teachers must apprentice students through scaffolded instruction and guided practice, helping students “develop the capacity to read disciplinary-specific texts through an insider perspective” (Buehl, 2011, p. 10). So, what are the broader implications of disciplinary literacy? Disciplinary literacy pushes students to move beyond reading, writing, listening, and viewing solely for academic purposes, namely to complete school-based homework and pass tests. Instead, instruction framed around disciplinary literacy illustrates to students the authentic ways to engage within the disciplines—generating, communicating, and applying knowledge in the field (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

“Students learn to identify and consider the perspectives, privilege, message, and source of the texts they consume.”

When teachers shift student learning towards disciplinary literacy, they encourage students to think, read, and act as scientists, artists, musicians, mathematicians, authors, and historians (Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2011).

To illustrate, students in social studies classes must learn how to understand, read, and interpret primary and secondary source documents within context (Wineburg & Reisman, 2015). Disciplinary literacy challenges these students to move beyond reading a historical text solely for information. Students learn to identify and consider

the perspective, privilege, message, and source of the texts they consume. Doing so affords students opportunities to critically analyze and assess the ways they consume texts in order to understand the world in which they live. Furthermore, they can then understand the world(s) in which the *original* audience members lived. As students

practice these important aspects of historical inquiry, they move beyond learning history for history’s sake. Instead, students begin to emulate the work of modern-day historians, who seek to frame and deepen the understandings of the past and present.

As another example, in secondary biological science courses students learn to consume and produce scientific texts. Different from what they might do in a history course, students who are being apprenticed into the scientific

community mimic the communicative and engagement practices of professionals in their field. That is, students studying biological science have opportunities to learn, reflect upon, and communicate their understandings of conceptual change through interpretation, observation,

“Disciplinary literacy pushes students to move beyond reading, writing, listening, and viewing solely for academic purposes.”

analysis, and data representation (Biological Sciences Curriculum Study, 2015). In the same way, professional scientists engage in similar practices not only as they conduct research but also as they disseminate findings to others—findings that have the potential to inform local, national, and international policies and practices. Therefore, it is important to consider the specific literacy practices necessary for full engagement in a given discipline, not only to apprentice novices but also to enable students to more deeply understand the discipline itself, thus inviting them to engage in the disciplinary discourse and culture (Moje, 2008).

Each discipline has specific ways and means of knowing and communicating, and when adolescents have opportunities to engage in these discipline-specific practices, they begin to see themselves as historians, musicians, scientists, artists, writers, mathematicians, among other professionals

(Moje, 2008). To that end, secondary teachers who understand what it means to learn in a particular discipline, and what counts as knowledge in that discipline, offer their students opportunities to engage in specific literacy practices (Wineburg & Reisman, 2015). In doing so, the cultivation of the next generation of scientists, historians, musicians, artists, writers, engineers, mathematicians begins well before they enter the profession.

“Professional scientists engage in similar practices not only as they conduct research but also as they disseminate findings to others—findings that have the potential to inform local, national, and international policies and practices.”



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