

authentic to the CORE

The “disciplinary literacy” approach creates authentic learning experiences in the core curriculum as students read and analyze primary source documents.

When you walk into Jon Perry’s high school history classroom, it is clear from the moment you cross the threshold that it is not a traditional learning environment. Co-constructed charts full of students’ thinking adorn the walls, as do charts that set an expectation for a true learning community.

Students are not sitting compliantly in desks as they watch Perry lecture from a PowerPoint. Instead, they are reading and annotating primary source documents, making meaning about these documents with each other, and learning alongside their teacher, who is skillfully coaching them not to simply learn history, but to actually become apprentice historians through a “disciplinary literacy” approach to instruction.

While this may sound like an educational fantasy – the stuff dreams are made of – the transformation in Perry’s practice hasn’t happened spontaneously or magically. Instead, it has developed through intentional moves by Perry, as well as through the powerful support he is receiving from leaders at both the site and district level.

When we think about what makes learning relevant to

students, often we narrow our thinking to electives or career technical education. While these do provide powerful opportunities for students to make relevant connections to their learning, we can also create authentic experiences in the core curriculum.

Learning for a new era

In the San Juan Unified School District, we are choosing to do this through an introduction to disciplinary literacy in secondary English/language arts and social science. Disciplinary literacy, an approach that asks students to read, write, think and speak as a member of a discipline (McConachie, Petrosky and Resnick, 2009), engages students as historians, scientists, mathematicians, readers and writers.

Through their work in the classroom, students see themselves as doing work the way that a member of a discipline would work in his or her field. This allows them to understand how the subjects in the core curriculum connect to life outside of school.

By Nicole Kukral and Stacy Spector

When Perry talks about the way disciplinary literacy has benefitted his students, he discusses the way this approach is more like the way we learn in the “real world.”

“In life,” he says, “you’re not given a range of choices where only one is right. Life just doesn’t work that way.” And he’s right.

Through the routines and structures that create a disciplinary literacy classroom, students are required to read, analyze and annotate complex text; write about what they are learning; discuss their learning with their peers in multiple ways, ranging from pairs to whole group; chart their learning and display it in the classroom; read texts multiple times for multiple purposes; draw connections between texts in order to synthesize understanding; and learn significant content while simultaneously learning to think.

If you can’t see it in the core, it’s not there

As Harvard Professor Richard Elmore discusses in his book “Instructional Rounds in Education” (2009), the instructional core has three elements: the academic content, the student’s relationship to the content, and the teacher’s knowledge and skill. Elmore and his colleagues argue that the only way to improve instruction is to improve the core. They also state that if we improve one element of the core, we must improve the other two.

When we examine the work of disciplinary literacy that is happening in Perry’s class (and elsewhere across our district), we realize that this approach is grounded in changing all three elements of the core.

First, students in a disciplinary literacy classroom are reading and analyzing primary source documents instead of simply reading their textbook’s interpretation of historical events. This addresses – and improves – the level and quality of academic content in their classroom.

Second, their interactions with the content change as students become not passive recipients of information, but active creators of meaning. In the disciplinary literacy approach, working with peers to create these interpretations through meaningful dialogue is essential.

Finally, a very important component in all of this is the training and support the classroom teachers receive. By the time the school year is over, Perry and the other teachers participating in the introduction to disciplinary literacy will have attended 12 days of training, provided by the Institute for Learning from the University of Pittsburgh. In addition to that, Perry is provided with coaching from his principal, as well as a teacher on special assignment.

The nested learning model

In San Juan Unified, we believe in a nested learning model, where district-level administrators coach principals, principals coach teachers, and teachers coach their students.

Through the disciplinary literacy introduction, principals

have received very explicit leadership training around how to support teachers who are shifting to a disciplinary literacy approach in their classrooms. They are also provided opportunities to learn alongside their teachers so that they are familiar with the rituals and routines they should be seeing as they work with classroom practitioners.

Everyone learning together

This principal training sets the expectation that everyone is learning together, and it aligns with our district’s theory of action that student learning will improve only when the quality of instruction improves.

We know, however, that we cannot have high expectations for teachers or principals when we do not provide appropriate levels of support.

Perry will tell you that the coaching he receives is instrumental in his success. Because his principal understands and supports the work he is doing in his classroom, Perry has the security of taking risks, trying new approaches, and knowing that it’s safe to make mistakes. And because his principal understands how a disciplinary literacy classroom may look different than a traditional one, he knows how to support Perry in pushing his practice to the next level.

Learning high-level content at a deep level

Of course, the benefit of all of this work is that it has tremendous impact on student learning. Not only do students see that what they are doing matters; they also are learning high-level content at a deep level. Students who were not writing at the beginning of the term now construct arguments, use evidence and synthesize texts.

Instead of hearing “I don’t know,” when teachers initiate a whole-class discussion, we now hear students saying, “I agree with Taylor because…” or “What is your evidence for that argument?” This has happened because the teacher, through the support of regular coaching and feedback, has set and modeled these expectations with his students and because he continues to grow as an educator.

Students are also succeeding on more traditional forms of assessment. For example, their grades have improved dramatically during the course of Perry’s implementation, with students who were failing his class early in the term demonstrating proficiency in their writing and reasoning skills on his semester final.

Another benefit to this work is that it is laying the groundwork for our transition to the Common Core State Standards in our district. Part of our approach to this shift is to embed Common Core into the literacy instruction we are already doing districtwide, and disciplinary literacy is a perfect fit.

Taking this approach to scale

Our district is still learning what we need to do in order to take this instructional approach to scale. However, we do know what is working so far to create these results in classrooms across a system that serves approximately 42,000 students.



■ Focus on the core

We know that student learning will only improve when we focus on the core. We need to continually initiate improvement strategies that zero in on the academic content, students' relationship to that content, and teachers' knowledge and skill. If we focus instead on structural, procedural or operational changes such as grading policies, homework policies, or test prep, we will not achieve what we really want – for students to learn at high levels in order to succeed in our exponentially changing world.

■ Take a long-term approach

Instructional improvement at scale does not happen in a year's time. Develop both short- and long-term goals, and be patient and persistent. Also, develop ways to measure success, focusing on changing classroom practice and improving student learning.

■ Provide coaching and support

We cannot have high expectations for our students without supporting them. We cannot do that to adults, either. In order to expect teachers to change practice, we must provide structures and routines that help them do so. Simply providing training opportunities may help, but not enough. We need to train our principals to be instructional leaders and coaches, too. Powerful instructional leadership leads to powerful change in our schools.

■ Build capacity

In these severely depressing budgetary times, staffs at both district- and site-levels are dwindling. That is why it is more important than ever to not only coach teachers to change their own classroom practice, but to also coach them to become teacher leaders so they can share what is working in their classrooms and spread these improvements to others.

– Nicole Kukral and Stacy Spector

Another benefit to this work is that it is laying the groundwork for our transition to the Common Core State Standards in our district. Part of our approach to this shift is to embed Common Core into the literacy instruction we are already doing district-wide, and disciplinary literacy is a perfect fit. With its emphasis on the simultaneous development of content knowledge and thinking skills – or habits of mind – it aligns almost seamlessly with the demands that the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officials have envisioned for our nation's children.

The Common Core State Standards are very explicit that literacy is a shared responsibility, and in San Juan Unified, we are supporting educators to become literacy teachers in every discipline.

As our district moves forward with the disciplinary literacy approach, we are confident that instructional improvement will continue as long as we employ the strategies that are working for us: focus on the core, take a long-term approach, provide coaching and support, and build capacity (see left).

What is possible when learning matters

Perry is an example of what happens when we invest in people – both students and adults. We know there is a tremendous amount of work ahead of us. However, while we watch Perry coach his students to be thinkers and work with them to create meaning, we understand what is truly possible when it is the learning that matters. ■

On the web: Visit www.acsa.org/commoncore to learn more about the Common Core State Standards.

References

- City, E.; Elmore, R.; Fiarman, S. & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- McConachie, S.; Petrosky, A. & Resnick, L. (2010). *Content matters: A disciplinary literacy approach to improving student learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wagner, T. (2008). *The global achievement gap: Why even our best schools don't teach the new survival skills our children need – and what we can do about it*. New York: Basic Books.

Nicole Kukral is a secondary teacher on special assignment, Professional Learning and Curriculum Innovation, Division of Teaching and Learning, San Juan Unified School District. Stacy Spector is director, Professional Learning and Curriculum Innovation, Division of Teaching and Learning, San Juan Unified School District.