Disciplinary Literacy in Social Studies for the Elementary Classroom

Lisa Lacefield, M. Ed.
lessonsinhistoryblog@gmail.com
What is Disciplinary Literacy?

Experts in various fields read their respective texts quite differently!

Disciplinary literacy is the application of discipline-specific practices as a way to access, comprehend, synthesize, and communicate knowledge. It is a tailored skill set that students must have in order to navigate an array of complex, informational texts within the discipline.
Why is Disciplinary Literacy Important?

Each discipline has specialized

- habits of mind or ways of thinking,
- language and vocabulary,
- nuances and subtleties,
- text types to comprehend,
- ways of communicating in writing,
- and career requirements,

and students must be equipped to recognize these things.
Why Use Disciplinary Literacy?

“The Common Core asks students to read stories and literature, as well as more complex texts that provide facts and background knowledge in areas such as science and social studies. Students will be challenged and asked questions that push them to refer back to what they’ve read. This stresses critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills that are required for success in college, career, and life.”

Common Core State Standards Initiative
Why Use Disciplinary Literacy?

C3 Document

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts
Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
Dimension 4: Communication Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

C3: College, Career, and Civic Life Framework
Why Use Disciplinary Literacy?

“Throughout Grades K-4, students will develop and apply disciplinary literacy skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. As students seek answers to compelling and supporting questions, they will examine a variety of primary and secondary sources and communicate responses in multiple ways, including oral, visual, and written forms. Students must be able to select and evaluate sources of information, draw and build upon ideas, explore issues, examine data, and analyze events from the full range of human experience to develop critical thinking skills essential for productive citizens.”

Arkansas K-4 Social Studies Frameworks
What Should Disciplinary Literacy Involve in Upper Grades?

“Asking a teacher to become a reading teacher is distinctly different from asking a teacher to help students master texts within the teacher’s own field. In fact, subject-area teachers are best qualified to help their students master texts in each course. Subject-area teachers should not be expected to teach basic reading skills, but they can help students develop critical strategies and skills for reading texts in each subject.”

Southern Regional Education Board
2009 Policy Statement, page 5
What Should Disciplinary Literacy Involve in Upper Grades?

“..’disciplinary literacy’ – advanced literacy instruction embedded within content-area classes such as math, science, and social studies – should be a focus of middle and secondary school settings. Moving beyond the oft-cited ‘every teacher a teacher of reading’ philosophy that has historically frustrated secondary content teachers, Timothy and Cynthia Shanahan present data collected during the first two years of a study on disciplinary literacy that reveal how content experts and secondary content teachers read disciplinary texts, make use of comprehension strategies, and subsequently teach those strategies to adolescent readers.”

*Harvard Educational Review, Spring 2008 Issue*

“Teaching Disciplinary Literacy to Adolescents: Rethinking Content-Area Literacy”
What Does Disciplinary Literacy Require?
A Shift in Teacher Perspective and Instruction

Content Area Reading

Generalized approach to develop better readers in order to understand the content

Strategies are implemented across disciplines

Focus on generic reading processes or strategies (summarizing, questioning, inference)

Disciplinary Literacy

Specific approach to unveil how reading and writing are uniquely used in the discipline being studied

Primary focus on language and text demands within a discipline

Focus on specialized processes in the discipline (sourcing, generating a hypothesis justifying a claim)

Shanahan, 2012
A Shift in Student Perspective and Learning

- Fact collecting
- Textbook
- Notice who, what, where, chronology
- Truth statements

- Notice why and how
- Variety of texts read critically
- Notice cause/effect relationships and hypotheses
- Arguments
Disciplinary Literacy in Social Studies
Disciplinary Reading In Social Studies

Involves a comprehension of:

- Text features and text structures
- Conceptual vocabulary
- Prior knowledge
- Perspective
- Visual information (multiple formats)
Disciplinary Writing In Social Studies

- Choosing words, information, formats, and structures deliberately
- Using technology strategically to create, refine, and collaborate on writing
- Gathering information, evaluating sources, and citing material accurately
- Formulating claims and counter-claims, and defending the position through textual evidence
The Use of Historical Thinking Skills

- Sourcing
- Corroborating
- Contextualizing
- Close-reading
- Identifying the subtext
The Lenses of Social Studies

- History
- Geography
- Economics
- Political Science
What Does Disciplinary Literacy in Social Studies Look Like?

Reading Like a Historian

Exploring Emigration: Maps and Migration

Keep It or Junk It: A Student-Run Lesson

Antiques Road Show: Show and Tell
So what can I do within my classroom?
1. Be knowledgeable of your frameworks, the CCSS, and C3.

2. Read non-fiction historical texts regularly in your classroom. Incorporate multiple perspectives when possible.

3. Introduce the common language and vocabulary of reading and writing within the discipline of social studies.

4. Provide direct, explicit instruction about text features and text structures.

5. Expose students to multiple, varied primary source materials.

6. Use compelling questions to drive your instruction.
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Suggestions for High Quality Non-Fiction Historical Texts

- Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal
- Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People
- Coretta Scott King Book Awards
- Common Core State Standards Appendix B: Exemplar Texts
- Common Core Scholastic Book Lists
- ReadWorks
- Library of Congress Primary Source Sets
- Newseum
- Pinterest
Why use primary sources?

Primary sources provide a window into the past—unfiltered access to the record of artistic, social, scientific and political thought and achievement during the specific period under study, produced by people who lived during that period.

Bringing young people into close contact with these unique, often profoundly personal, documents and objects can give them a very real sense of what it was like to be alive during a long-past era.

.Library of Congress
Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade

Guiding Question (in later grades this will be known as the compelling question):

How did the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade begin? (lower grades)

Do you think the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade would be what it is today without the influence of Tony Sarg? (upper grades)

Supporting Questions:

Who was Tony Sarg? How did Mr. Sarg’s talents influence the way the Macy’s parade was designed?
Read-aloud “attention getter”
Primary and Secondary Source Documents

- **The Puppeteer Who Brought Balloons to the Thanksgiving Day Parade** (Smithsonian Magazine article with background information for teachers, plus four original photographs)

- **Tony Sarg: Balloons Over Broadway** (YouTube video – Sarg biography)

- **Macy's Parade, 1930's** (YouTube video – archival footage)

- **Balloons Over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade** (non-fiction picture book – this is your main piece)
Graphic Organizers, Activities, and Response Sheets

- Reading and Language Arts Dice Games
- Biography Graphic Organizer
- Reaction to the Text
- Non-fiction Graphic Organizer
- Non-fiction Report
If I can help in any way, please let me know!

Lisa Lacefield
(870)-734-6435
lessonsinhistoryblog@gmail.com