

Disciplinary Literacy: A Select Research Bibliography

Teacher-Leaders interested in taking a deeper dive into disciplinary literacy might peruse this bibliography, adapted from one shared by Tim Shanahan in 2017. It contains citations for history, mathematics, science, and the study of literature (as a discipline rather than generic literacy activities that just happen to be in an English class, for example).

Shanahan opens his bibliography by making a distinction between a focus on disciplinary literacy and what we might call writing to learn in the content areas or writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC). The entries below, with their focus on the disciplines and how experts generally think, read, and write in the disciplines, may open up new perspectives for content area teachers.

Shanahan writes:

These days I hear a lot of reading authorities talking (and writing) about disciplinary literacy, but they really mean adolescent literacy or content area reading and writing. They don't understand the distinction that is being made. Disciplinary literacy refers to the specialized or somewhat unique texts or text features in those texts that are the province of a particular field of study and the specialized approaches to reading and writing texts used by experts in a field of study. Thus, historians, because they create, communicate, and evaluate a different kind of knowledge than scientists, use different kinds of text and have different ways of reading such text than scientists.

There are various ways that one can study the information in text to remember it for a test or something, and that probably doesn't vary much across contents. But disciplinary literacy refers not to those student or learning concerns, but to the ways of reading/writing that are specialized to the actual fields of study. There is nothing wrong with addressing how to teach reading better in a social studies class or how to teach students to learn better from a social studies textbook... that just isn't what we mean by disciplinary studies. Thus, if someone is talking about how to read like a scientist, they are dealing with disciplinary literacy. But if they are talking about how to do story problems in math, how to memorize terminology in a science class, or the most pedagogically sound textbook to use in social studies, they are really talking about something else. If it is about being a better student or learning to read more effectively, it is not about disciplinary literacy (though I suspect if teachers focused more on apprenticing the students into the disciplines, they would become better students).

Happy reading!

Disciplinary Literacy Bibliography

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