

FOREWORD

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED in moving students' literacy to the next level, then this book is for you. If you want someone to tell you exactly how to do that, then this book is not for you.

For some readers, this may feel a little like going to a doctor with a pressing health issue and being told that you need to make lifestyle changes rather than taking that magic pill you were hoping for. On the one hand, the magic pill or the clear prescription for high-level literacy is so appealing. On the other hand, the magic pill can have unintended side effects and doesn't account for the inevitable variations in context among people and environments, thus, working for some better than others. And sometimes, as is the case here, the magic prescription with its just-do-this-and-that clarity doesn't exist.

While I confess that I often wish for easy fixes, I also have a strong suspicion of them when it comes to difficult challenges. Once I get over my disappointment that the solution may be every bit as complex as the problem, it can be rather liberating to take control of my own destiny, particularly if there is some expert assistance available to adapt to fit my situation.

The authors of this book, Christina Dobbs, Jacy Ippolito, and Megin Charner-Laird, offer just the right kind of expert assistance, grounded in both research and practice. They know what they're talking about, and they also know that context matters. Thus, they pose a mix of conceptual grounding and practical things to do, with their seven-step framework sitting in the middle of the "why" and the "how" as synthetic glue. They offer all that to you and trust you to make it work in your context.

Their framework is a treasure trove in its own right. Even if you are interested in some focus other than disciplinary literacy, I'd recommend the book as a helpful antidote to some other long-standing plagues of school improvement, including blaming teachers, "collaboration," and "professional development"

with little learning to show for lots of resources invested, and data-based inquiry that wanes at the point of action.

Instead, Dobbs, Ippolito, and Charner-Laird suggest that we respect and build from teachers' expertise, design based on what we know about effective professional learning, and rely on a mix of teacher leadership, collaborative structures, and experimentation to move from inquiry to action. In short, they give you the best of what we know about how to actually change practice and center teachers firmly as the agents rather than the targets of change. How refreshing. And more important, how potentially potent.

WHY DISCIPLINARY LITERACY?

Before reading this book, I hadn't heard of "disciplinary literacy." I had taught English and Humanities to middle school and high school students in two countries and three states. I had been a literacy coach to middle school teachers in Boston. And I had served as principal of a secondary school in which we taught reading strategies across the curriculum. I love literacy. But *disciplinary* literacy? It's counterintuitive for me, particularly in the twenty-first century.

Shouldn't we be getting away from disciplines? Most lists of "twenty-first-century skills" emphasize things like teamwork and problem solving, and there is increasing focus in schools on "real world" projects that are interdisciplinary in nature. Subjects in silos seem so twentieth century. . . .

Dobbs, Ippolito, and Charner-Laird quickly convinced me that the emergent field of disciplinary literacy is not about content silos, but about communication. Put simply, it's about how experts in various domains communicate. How do mathematicians, musicians, biologists, historians, and poets make sense of the world and relay that? What does it sound like when they talk to each other? What texts do they draw on? How do they use print, images, and other media to engage others with their ideas?

Disciplinary literacy makes sense because it puts communication in context rather than asking students to engage in the artifices of school. Very twenty-first century.

I'm drawn to the concept of disciplinary literacy for three reasons. First and foremost: power. When we treat students as mathematicians, scientists, artists, and writers, and when we make transparent for them the manners and modes of interpreting, challenging, and persuading, we unlock the worlds of professions

and expertise and hand students the keys. These keys are particularly powerful for those students whose primary access to them is through school.

Second: disciplinary literacy connects with teachers' existing strengths and builds from them. Many a time, I have heard the refrain, "But I am not an English teacher!" in response to requests or demands to teach reading and/or writing across the curriculum. My rather impatient internal response has been, "Yes, but that doesn't let you off the hook for teaching reading/writing!" Spoken like an English teacher. Turns out, I was right, and so were the refrainers. Disciplinary literacy meets content teachers where they are—as masters of their disciplines—and asks them to apprentice students. While this approach requires teachers to learn some things, like how to make explicit what is ingrained and often easy for them, that learning builds from expertise rather than ignoring it. That is a much more enjoyable and efficacious way to learn.

Third: the pursuit of disciplinary literacy as described by Dobbs, Ippolito, and Charner-Laird is well positioned to produce positive organizational side effects. Their inquiry process is a means of building productive teams and organizations with healthy habits and mind-sets. It is less about producing best practices than about learning for children, adults, and the organization.

BUILDING DISCIPLINARY LITERACY

Dobbs, Ippolito, and Charner-Laird argue that building disciplinary literacy is fundamentally an "adaptive" enterprise, not a technical one. In other words, there is a level of uncertainty about how to do it, and it requires shifts in mind-sets and beliefs, as well as practice. Adaptive work, as described by my colleague Ronald Heifetz, by definition cannot be captured in a technical manual or cookbook approach.

I agree with the authors' assessment that this is adaptive work, and I appreciate their deft provision of ingredients and suggestions without prescriptive recipes. Some of those ingredients will sound familiar to many readers—for example, professional learning communities, inquiry, and teacher leadership—and what you will find here is: (a) how to do them well, and (b) how they can be more powerful together than apart. While that alone would be a contribution, I find even more valuable three uncommon suggestions from the authors.

First, pay attention to beginnings and endings. Especially endings. While Dobbs, Ippolito, and Charner-Laird spend time helping readers be thoughtful

about how to venture into disciplinary literacy, including “seductive traps” to avoid, their more radical notion is that the initiative should have a decided end point. How cathartic!

“Action space” is another of the radical ideas they invite readers to consider. What kind of “space” is there for the kind of “action” you seek in your organization right now? If your answer is something like “Space? What space?” or “Did you mean action outside the sixty-seven initiatives we are currently doing?” then the authors suggest that you ponder a few more questions before deciding whether and when to dive into disciplinary literacy.

While resonant with my own understanding of improvement, Dobbs, Ippolito, and Charner-Laird’s frame of experimentation is rare in practice. They encourage quick loops of inquiry that include small changes and experiments designed, tested, and analyzed by teachers. As you read the book, note how tightly focused the examples of inquiry are—teachers are not tackling the whole of disciplinary literacy, but instead are engaging some specific puzzle or problem related to student learning. In my experience, it is the focus that feels almost too small that leads to actual learning. Improvement is less the end product of arduous inquiry than a series of micro-moments intentionally designed and learned from.

This book fundamentally is about agency, building from what you have, designing intentionally, and learning collaboratively and continuously. It is about discipline as both context and approach. As context, literacy is situated within disciplines as a way of moving past the plateaus many of us have encountered after teaching what the authors call “intermediate” strategies. Discipline as approach is well captured by Boston surgeon Atul Gawande in his book, *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right*:

What is needed, however, isn’t just that people working together be nice to each other. It is discipline. Discipline is hard—harder than trustworthiness and skill and perhaps even than selflessness. We are by nature flawed and inconstant creatures. We can’t even keep from snacking between meals. We are not built for discipline. We are built for novelty and excitement, not for careful attention to detail. Discipline is something we have to work at.

Dobbs, Ippolito, and Charner-Laird show how educators can move from “being-nice-to-each-other” collaborations to disciplined inquiry. Experts do not always have answers, but they have great questions, and Dobbs, Ippolito, and Charner-Laird offer some of both. While disciplinary literacy is plainly something “we have to work at,” it is also clearly worth doing for and with students.

Literacy is freedom, hope, and power. Through the lens of disciplinary literacy, may this book help you unlock more of the incredible potential in yourself, your colleagues, and your students.

Elizabeth A. City
Senior Lecturer on Education
Faculty Director, Doctor of Educational Leadership Program
Harvard Graduate School of Education