

INTRODUCTION

AS FORMER TEACHERS, reading specialists, and literacy coaches, we know firsthand how excellent professional development projects can bolster teacher and student learning. Alternately, professional learning can be a deadly waste of time, money, and energy if not carefully constructed. While we—Christina Dobbs, Jacy Ippolito, and Megin Charner-Laird—now spend the bulk of our time teaching in higher-education classrooms, we also focus a good deal of our professional and academic energy on designing, implementing, and studying successful professional learning endeavors. We're fascinated by the question of how to authentically build and support professional learning projects to increase teacher and student learning, especially student reading, writing, and communication skills. In many ways, this book answers this question, based on both our professional experiences and academic research. But we knew that answering this question in a general or mainly theoretical manner might be of little use to those who matter the most to us—teachers on the ground, working daily with young people in schools. Instead, we knew that focus and utility were key. In order to provide these elements and use our own areas of expertise, we have grounded our thinking about professional learning in the particular case of *disciplinary literacy professional learning*.

More than a half-dozen years ago, we began turning our collective attention to the newly emerging field of *disciplinary literacy*, or the study of how both experts and novice students read, write, and communicate within specific disciplinary fields. What does it mean to engage in disciplinary literacy work? One might start to answer this question by considering how discipline-specific experts read, write, and communicate similarly or differently depending on their field. For example, which ways of thinking, communicating, and working do artists, biologists, historians, and statisticians share? Which ways of thinking are different? At the heart of disciplinary literacy is a deep understanding of key differences between disciplines in how knowledge is constructed and how it is

transmitted within and across academic and vocational fields. Building on these understandings, teachers might begin to consider how best to induct students into these same disciplinary subcultures, helping students slowly gain access and insight into various disciplinary fields through the advanced language, ways of thinking, and ways of working associated with each discipline. In this way, teachers serve as guides, introducing and inviting students into the communities of artists, biologists, historians, or statisticians by teaching them the language and analytic approaches specific to those disciplines.

At the outset of the twenty-first century, teachers and leaders in US schools are grappling with how to prepare students to meet the challenges of a more global economy. Workplace demands, college expectations, and new standards for preK-12 education are reshaping education nationwide. We believe that a more deliberate focus on disciplinary literacy instruction is necessary in order to support students as they forge ahead to face these challenges. And while new research about disciplinary literacy is being published (some of which we review in the first chapters of this book), little is currently known or shared about how to effectively engage teachers in the complex professional learning they need to teach in ways that support disciplinary literacy.

Disciplinary literacy professional learning is different from professional learning writ large. To truly understand the nuances of one's own discipline, and how to teach the reading, writing, and communication patterns of disciplinary insiders (experts in their fields), teachers must embark on an individual and collaborative journey. Ideally, teams of teachers must uncover the ways in which they were inducted into various disciplines and develop strategies to best apprentice their own students in beginning to do this disciplinary work. Moreover, many teachers go into fields for which they already feel some great affinity or expertise. Helping students who may not feel similarly about their disciplines requires a great deal of strategic thinking and action.

Thus, we argue in this book that the disciplinary literacy instruction that is so sorely needed in our twenty-first-century schools depends largely on the quality of instruction that students receive and thus depends largely on the quality and kind of professional learning experiences that support such instruction. But that kind of professional learning is neither simple nor quick.

In this book, we provide a road map for teams of secondary educators and leaders to build their own capacity to provide disciplinary literacy instruction. While many articles and books have emerged in the past twenty years purporting

to address the challenges facing adolescents in literacy, we take a fundamentally different approach here. We set out not to solve the myriad content-area literacy instructional challenges found in every middle and high school nationwide. Instead, we describe an approach in which teachers and leaders can identify and craft context-specific solutions, to tinker effectively toward a better marriage of content and literacy teaching and learning, in order to help students develop the disciplinary literacy skills and habits that will propel them into more advanced work.

We have developed this road map, our multistep framework, across the last ten years, as we have worked closely with a number of different schools and districts to improve adolescent literacy outcomes for their students by focusing on disciplinary literacy. We are university professors who have previously worked in K-12 schools and who now split our time between supporting pre-service teachers and helping in-service teachers across grade levels. In this book we hope to use what we have learned about literacy and professional learning to help teachers find and build tools to improve their instruction. We have sometimes been frustrated at the general ways that most professional learning opportunities for teachers tend to ignore the priorities of teachers and to devalue their knowledge and expertise.

So, years ago, when a high school asked us to lead a literacy initiative, we began to think about how to combine current knowledge of literacy research with more lasting and powerful models of professional learning in ways that could support a particular school context. Since then, we have worked with a variety of schools, some with many resources and some with far fewer, some large and some small. In each case, we find that when teachers deliberately and strategically collaborate to improve disciplinary literacy outcomes, we see meaningful changes in teachers' instructional practices. Over time and across many collaborative initiatives with teachers, we have piloted and refined a framework for collaborative professional learning about disciplinary literacy to support teachers over time. We will describe this framework in more detail throughout the book and hear from many participants in the projects we have supported in the past decade.

This book is not filled with quick fixes, which are always hit or miss at best, depending on your own school structure, faculty, or student population. Instead, this book honors and calls upon your own expertise, and supports you as you enter into and refine your own iterative professional learning process.

Therefore, we have written this book with several types of readers in mind. We see this book primarily in the hands of teachers, school leaders, and district and state leaders who are eager to help disciplinary literacy instruction take hold in schools to raise student achievement in a variety of content areas. As the need to embrace disciplinary literacy grows, teachers and leaders need practical advice about how to tackle disciplinary literacy professional learning *now*. This book contains our best advice to undertake that work. It is aimed most directly at helping educators to successfully tackle the challenge of bringing disciplinary literacy instruction to their specific classrooms and schools. However, this book is also useful for educational consultants, researchers, and those teaching in higher education and preservice teacher-preparation programs. This book may serve as an excellent guide and jumping-off point for those who are considering how best to support others in designing and studying effective literacy-based professional learning projects. If we are to truly see a proliferation of authentic, effective, ongoing professional learning around disciplinary literacy instruction, then we will need a wide variety of educators engaged in the endeavor from different vantage points.

With these different audiences in mind, we have divided the book into two major sections. The first part, “Bringing Together Disciplinary Literacy and Professional Learning,” comprising three chapters, provides foundational background information that readers may need or wish to review, in order to support later practical chapters focused on how to design and implement professional learning projects. The first three chapters, respectively, review the emerging field of disciplinary literacy research and teaching, foundational elements of effective professional learning, and the possible design of *disciplinary literacy professional learning* projects. This first part of the book ends, in chapter 3, with an introduction to our seven-step framework for how readers might design and implement a disciplinary literacy professional learning project.

The second part, “Designing and Enacting Disciplinary Literacy Professional Learning,” begins with chapter 4. Each of the chapters 4 through 10 are devoted to different phases of the seven-step design and implementation process—all with an eye toward the kinds of context-specific decisions and modifications required to ensure that the professional learning work is tailored to the teachers and students in particular schools and districts. These chapters are process focused and filled with practical suggestions for how to engage various

professional stakeholders. We move from early investigative and needs assessment work to design phases, early implementation, and finally refinement and scaling of the work. These practical chapters include potential supports such as discussion-based protocols to use when talking with various community members, questions to guide leadership team discussions and decisions, potential pitfalls to avoid, and Snapshots of Practice highlighting disciplinary literacy work from schools that illustrate the various steps in our design and implementation process.

The snapshots of disciplinary literacy throughout the book come directly from teachers and leaders with whom we have worked, each of whom has successfully navigated their way through unique, complex disciplinary literacy professional learning initiatives.¹ Many of the snapshots we include come from a lengthy project we worked on for several years at Brookline High School in Brookline, Massachusetts, which had many participants across four years of collaboration. You will also see snapshots from projects in other schools and districts, including Boston and Acton-Boxborough. Below, we briefly describe each of the disciplinary literacy initiatives mentioned in snapshots throughout the text in chapters 4–10. We, the authors of the book, participated in a variety of ways in each project. The size and scope of the projects varied greatly, because each was tailored to the particular needs and resources of their schools and districts.

Brookline High School's Content-Area Reading Initiative. Brookline High School's Content-Area Reading Initiative (CRI) was designed as a four-year project, which allowed for a total of six teams of high school content-area teachers, specialists, and librarians to explore a wide variety of literacy-related domains (e.g., academic language, vocabulary, discussion, writing, and so on). The first cohort of three teams comprised English, social studies, and world languages teachers, and they collaborated for the initial two years of the project. The second cohort of three teams worked together for the last two years of the project, and they represented the math and science departments, as well as a cross-role team (team "Hybrid") focused on meeting the needs of students with learning differences. Structural features of the project included summer institutes, weekly small-team meetings led by designated teacher leaders, quarterly cross-team "days away" (where the teams would meet off-site, out of their school building, to share new learning), and consulting coaches who led professional learning and coached teams throughout.

OneDot. “*One Dorchester*” was a four-year, school-driven effort among three schools—Boston Collegiate Charter School, Cristo Rey Boston High School, and the Jeremiah Burke High School—to learn from each other in the quest to improve student outcomes. By sharing best practices and defining high-quality teaching and learning, this first-ever formal partnership between Boston-based district, charter, and Catholic schools built the capacity of teachers in all three schools to create transformational learning communities focused on equity, while increasing the number of students in Dorchester who were prepared to enter and succeed in college. Activities for each discipline-based team included participating in professional development and accessing materials related to the Common Core State Standards; observing each other in the classroom; engaging in collective analysis of student work; developing rubrics and assessments; surfacing ideas on instructional and curricular shifts to respond to student data; creating a common vision for high-quality work; and learning more about how to elicit high-quality work from students. The Lynch Foundation funded One Dorchester from July 2012 through July 2016; Gene Thompson-Grove from the School Reform Initiative (SRI) coordinated the effort. As part of her work, she asked us to lead a summer literacy institute with participating teacher teams designed to build disciplinary literacy knowledge.

Boston Green Academy Tenth-Grade Instructional Improvement Project. The BGA Instructional Improvement Project was a yearlong project with tenth-grade teachers across content areas at Boston Green Academy. The school was working hard to improve student achievement, so the project was designed to support teachers in enhancing their instruction to further that effort. A team of core teachers from humanities, literacy, math, and environmental science came together with specialist teachers from special education to focus on ensuring that all students were refining their literacy skills in the disciplines. The team, led by a teacher leader and with outside expertise from Christina as a consultant, met weekly to identify inquiry areas and design and evaluate new instructional practices.

Acton-Boxborough Disciplinary Literacy Initiative. The Acton-Boxborough Disciplinary Literacy Initiative was also designed as a four-year project, allowing for a total of twelve teams of middle and high school content-area teachers, specialists, and librarians to explore a wide variety of literacy-related domains (e.g., academic language, vocabulary, discussion, writing, and so on).

The teams also collaborated within cohorts, with each cohort of six teams (three from the middle school and three from the high school per cohort) spending roughly two years engaged in the initiative. Teams comprised both content-specific and cross-content area teachers and specialists. Teachers and specialists across all academic departments participated, including librarians. Monthly small-team meetings, monthly larger-group meetings, and regular delivery of new content from consulting coaches were stable features throughout the project. Other design features varied by cohort, with one cohort holding summer institutes, while the other received more direct professional development during the academic year. Both cohorts engaged in peer observation and instructional rounds as part of their work. Last, several emerging teacher leaders from the first cohort led monthly meetings and study groups for the second cohort.

Brookline Middle School Disciplinary Literacy Initiative. This disciplinary literacy initiative is ongoing, and in the first years of implementation. The project began with four cross-content area teams of teachers, with each team representing a different middle school in the district. The goal is to mirror Brookline's CRI project in its four-year structure, with teams collaborating for roughly two years at a stretch, and new cohorts of cross-content area teachers from other middle schools in the district joining the initiative during year three. Designated teacher leaders guide the teams of teachers, and they meet several times per month to collaboratively inquire into new disciplinary literacy instructional practices. The teams all come together for new professional learning, led by consulting coaches, roughly five times during the school year, and then once per summer (but not necessarily as part of a summer institute format).

We include the Snapshots of Practice in the book to honor the important work of these teachers and leaders, to bring to life aspects of our seven-step design and implementation process, and to help readers imagine some of the many different possible paths to success.

Most importantly, this book is designed to be a resource guide and source for deeper reflection when designing and implementing a disciplinary literacy professional learning initiative. This is not a cookbook, filled with exacting recipes that should be unwaveringly followed. Instead, this book is a reflective tool, crafted to help teachers and leaders consider the pros and cons of different decisions when designing and engaging in professional learning. To that end, some

readers (perhaps those early in their thinking about disciplinary literacy professional learning) may wish to read the book chapter by chapter, slowly building an understanding of the entire process of designing, implementing, and refining a professional learning initiative. Other readers with more experience in designing professional learning (perhaps those in the midst of their own project) might skim the early design chapters and then focus more closely on the later implementation and scaling chapters. Regardless of how you personally choose to navigate through the text, we do encourage all readers to spend some time reviewing the first three chapters. The early chapters form the theoretical foundation supporting the practical advice that appears in later chapters.

We hope that you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed writing it. We truly value the time we have spent with our partner schools and teachers, learning together about disciplinary literacy. We hope that these pages convey some of the same collaborative energy and enthusiasm that we feel every time we engage in that kind of collective learning. In creating this book, we learned a great deal from one another and from our partners, as we clarified and synthesized years' worth of thinking about disciplinary literacy professional learning work. We hope that this book sparks just as much thinking and good work for you.