



Disciplinary literacy and student-centered instruction and assessment in secondary social studies

Social studies, generally covering the social sciences of history, political science/civics, economics, and geography, are vital to learners and to societies. Social studies equip students to face many intersecting challenges affecting our current republic: civic disengagement, rampant misinformation, political polarization, and public debates over the content of our nation's history. As new challenges like social media and AI-generated content proliferate, critical thinking and evidence-based analysis become part of an ever-growing set of essential civic and life skills.

Disciplinary literacy in social studies

Part of what makes the social studies so important for students are the disciplinary literacy (DL) practices used in the social sciences to make sense of the world. Disciplinary literacy refers to the specialized literacy and communication practices of a particular disciplinary domain (Moje, 2015), and broadly speaking, DL in the social studies is grounded in inquiry, argumentation, and source analysis. It is characterized by the following practices:

- **Question or problem framing** to drive inquiry and source exploration
- **Critical analysis and synthesis** of information from diverse sources
- **Questioning reliability and bias** in evidence and/or sources

- **Data literacy**, including interpreting graphs and statistics
- **Contextual understanding**, placing events, sources, or trends in broader contexts
- **Argumentation** using evidence, logic, and disciplinary concepts
- **Effective communication**, through writing, speech, visuals, or policy recommendations

These general DL practices take on nuanced differences across the different areas of the social studies. For example, historians generate questions that guide their inquiry and research and help them find relevant source material (Bain, 2000). They assess the relevance and reliability of sources, considering who wrote or created them and in what historical context. They also engage in close reading, noting word choice and tone, and corroborating across sources to identify consistencies or contradictions (Wineburg, 2001). They then develop their own accounts to advance our understandings of the past. Disciplinary literacy in the social studies requires practicing analytical habits, developing arguments and explanations related to authentic issues and questions, and engaging in dialogue and communication.

Disciplinary literacy instruction in social studies

Students learn these practices not through textbook recitation but through apprenticeship learning experiences in which they engage in authentic inquiry connected to

important problems of the disciplines as well as to their own questions and experiences. Effective social studies instruction anchors learning in compelling questions drawn from the content area—whether history, civics, economics, or geography — and ideally generated by students. The inquiry-based framework of the [College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#), (2013) and the practice-focused recommendations of the [Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12](#) (2019) point to core instructional practices described below that support student-centered learning in the social studies.

In student-centered classrooms, students are challenged with meaningful problems or questions and encouraged to generate their own. They are then provided with access to relevant texts that vary in format, complexity, and perspective. As they engage with these texts, they are explicitly taught DL skills (e.g. corroborating across sources), and they are provided with supported opportunities to engage in dialogue, presentation, and writing (Stockdill & Woodward, 2022). In this context, curricular materials, including textbooks, remain valuable but are repositioned as one of many resources that facilitate inquiry and argument construction. Instruction involves students in developing foundational background knowledge as well as generating their own questions, analyzing evidence, and developing original arguments.

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Disciplinary literacy assessment is social studies

Assessment in disciplinary literacy then requires us to move beyond traditional quizzes, content recall, and document-based questions focused on summarization. Instead, DL assessment in social studies should provide students opportunities to demonstrate and get feedback on disciplinary literacy competencies such as the ability to source documents and use them critically as evidence to support a conclusion. Moreover, to align with basic principles of effective and equitable assessment, it should include:

- **Self-assessment and peer feedback**, fostering reflection and collaborative growth;
- **Multiple formats for student demonstration**, amplifying voice and choice; and
- **Differentiation and universal design principles**, ensuring that students leverage strengths and address challenges equitably.

While checking factual understanding remains important, our focus shifts toward projects and performance assessments that require students to construct and communicate evidence-based arguments. For example, as they explore a compelling historical question, students might engage with a limited set of short quizzes that check for understanding of key facts. However, more of their time and focus could be on a project that requires them to select a few documents from a larger text set; analyze these sources and place them in context; corroborate across the sources to identify shared elements; and then present an argument about their findings tied back to the compelling question.

Each component needs clear success criteria developed by the teacher with input from students. This sort of project could take multiple formats—from a podcast to a graphic novel to an essay—and provide students with opportunities to demonstrate DL skills and get meaningful feedback from peers and the teacher.

Shifting instruction and assessment practice

Teachers seeking to develop or shift their practice in this direction should consider starting small with changes at the activity or lesson level. By using ideas and no-cost resources from helpful websites such as those highlighted in the To Learn More section to the right, teachers can access existing materials and get ideas as to how to develop their own assessments. MAC's *Components of an Equitable Assessment System (CEAS) Brief* is another source for ideas and examples of assessment practices that assess deep and authentic learning, as well as socially-conscious, student-centered, and student-driven learning.

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References

- Bain, R. (2000). Into the breach: Using research and theory to shape history instruction." In P. Stearns, P. Seixas, and S. Wineburg, *Knowing, Teaching & Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (331-353). New York: New York University Press.
- Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network, Disciplinary Literacy Task Force. (2019). *Essential instructional practices for disciplinary literacy: grades 6 to 12*. Lansing, MI:

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Moje, E.B. (2015). Doing and teaching disciplinary literacy with adolescent learners: A social and cultural enterprise. *Harvard Educational Review* 85 (2), 254-278.

National Council for the Social Studies. (2013). College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the rigor of K-12 civics, economics, geography, and history. Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies.

Stockdill, D. and Woodward, S. (2022). "Enacting Disciplinary Literacy Instruction: Essential Practices in Action," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 37: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

TO LEARN MORE

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social

Studies Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History, National Council for the Social Studies (2013)

socialstudies.org/standards/c3

Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom:

Grades 6 to 12, Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators, General Education Leadership Network (2023)

qr.link/4DIdnN

Components of an Equitable Assessment System. Michigan Assessment Consortium (2024)

qr.link/gLVbaw

Classroom Tools:

- [Digital Inquiry Group. inquirygroup.org](https://digitalinquirygroup.org)
- [Read.Inquire.Write. readinquirewrite.umich.edu](https://readinquirewrite.umich.edu)

The Michigan Assessment Consortium is a professional association of educators who believe quality education depends on accurate, balanced, and meaningful assessment. MAC's Learning Points help increase the assessment literacy of all education stakeholders.