

Becoming Disciplined About Disciplinary Literacy Through Guided Retelling

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This article explores the use of guided retellings as a helpful tool for enhancing student production of the academic language and thinking habits associated with disciplinary literacy.

"How have you been incorporating disciplinary literacy into your instruction?" your colleague asks. You might hesitate a bit and think, That's a great question! It is a great question, and its answers vary widely as we continue to attempt to understand how to become more disciplined about disciplinary literacy and familiar with the best approaches for teaching this craft.

Disciplinary literacy can be defined as specialized ways of reading, understanding, and thinking in each academic discipline (C. Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). Disciplinary literacy's emphasis is placed on thinking and communicating in a manner that is congruent with the discipline. It differs from content area literacy in that it is not designed to provide strategies for improved acquisition of content area text; rather, it is asking students to adopt the language and thinking habits aligned with the language and thinking habits of those invested in the discipline. Moje (2007) defined these elements as linguistic and epistemological processes. Therefore, students are asked to work in a way that includes the style of language, methods, and cognitive questioning required in the discipline. For example, a fifth grader discussing the clouds associated with various weather patterns could be observed analyzing cloud cover and heard uttering, "With the presence of cumulonimbus clouds, the data suggest we have a thunderstorm ahead!" This is one simplified sample of the practice of disciplinary literacy in an everyday classroom where the academic language and thinking of the discipline emerge.

For some, this feels like a shift from typical practice. Many educators were trained in an era of content area literacy and the use of graphic organizers to enable acquisition of content. Without

a true understanding of the nuance affiliated with disciplinary literacy, lack of implementation ensues. Also, without adequate professional development related to disciplinary literacy and how it differs from content area literacy, teachers are often left puzzled and responding, as noted earlier, "That's a great question!" This results in teachers feeling less equipped to actualize disciplinary literacy practices in their classrooms (T. Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

Even more specifically, elementary teachers may wonder how young is too young to begin such a practice. As C. Shanahan and Shanahan (2014) confirmed, "It's never too early" (p. 639). Researchers have explored this area and found promising results and powerful effects of introducing disciplinary literacy in the elementary grades (Cervetti & Pearson, 2012; Palincsar & Magnusson, 2000). Elementary students prove quite capable of investigating phenomena, sharing their reasoning, and shifting between different lenses based on content (Juel, Hebard, Haubner, & Moran, 2010; Palincsar & Magnusson, 2000).

So, how can we support teachers and students in their efforts to engage in the discourse and thinking habits of disciplinary literacy in our elementary classrooms? Enter an elementary favorite: guided retellings.

This strategy, which many have used to support reading comprehension for years, can be a route for encouraging disciplinary literacy within our everyday instruction. In this teaching tip, I present the use of guided retellings through word- and image-based

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prompts as a vehicle for supporting all learners in their thinking and speaking like the discipline.

Guided Retellings

Guided retellings were designed to provide supported interactions with and responses to text through accentuated emphasis on structural elements in stories (Morrow, 1985). The efficacy of guided retellings was introduced to many by Morrow in 1985. Initially, guided retellings began as a series of prompts enacted when students struggled to provide a suitable summary of text.

As seen in Table 1, these prompts directed student attention toward the essential elements of a story. This was one way to consistently model and revisit the structure and discipline of narrative storytelling.

Over time, educators continued to reinforce the research base affirming guided retellings as a tool to support reading comprehension while also providing for collaborative learning and assessment (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Stahl, 2004). Educators also adapted and improved the practice by adopting visual cues in exchange for the scripted teacher-directed questioning. These visual cues were designed to further assist readers in understanding, organizing, and remembering essential information (Duke & Pearson, 2002/2008). They helped make thinking about a text less abstract and forgettable (Duke & Pearson, 2002/2008; Santoro, Chard, Howard, & Baker, 2008).

It is this low-risk practice of using verbal and visual prompts that offers support for students' retelling of informational text when they act as young scientists, historians, or mathematicians.

Table 1
Guided Retelling Protocol (Morrow, 1985)

Once upon a time...
Who was the story about?
When did the story happen?
Where did the story happen?
What was the problem in the story?
How did (the character) try to solve the problem?
How was the problem solved?
How did the story end?

Implementing Guided Retellings in Disciplinary Settings

The following four steps provide a framework for planning. They supply teachers with initial guidelines for establishing guided retellings in various disciplines and extend student thinking and use of the language patterns of the discipline (Moje, 2007).

Step 1: Identification of the Text

The use of guided retellings stems from students' response to text. Although narrative text was originally used (Morrow, 1985) during disciplinary literacy instruction, informational texts are most commonly chosen. Text length varies tremendously based on grade level, reading level, and the overall instructional intent.

Despite the length of the text, the retelling is implemented as a tool to check for student understanding via reiteration of the language and thinking associated with the content acquired (see Table 2). Because of the controlled structure of a guided retelling, the text selected for the task should house the requisite academic language and present content in a way that allows students to stretch their thinking in a manner that mirrors the discipline. The math student retells as a mathematician, the science student as a scientist, and so on.

Step 2: Identification of the Academic Language

In the era of the Common Core, many have become increasingly familiar with attention placed on student understanding and use of the language of the discipline. This is often referred to as *academic vocabulary* or *academic language* and includes essential content-specific vocabulary, such as *denominator* or *evaporation*, but also includes the verbs associated

Table 2
Pause and Ponder

How does the text selection allow for guided retelling prompts that support disciplinary discourse?
How does the text selection allow for guided retelling prompts that support disciplinary thinking habits?
How does the guided retelling support the opportunity to grow student academic and cultural capital?

with the thinking required by the discipline, such as *hypothesize*, *calculate*, and *evaluate*. Identification of the academic language for disciplinary literacy purposes, therefore, not only requires the Tier 3 content-specific vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013) but also commands that students embrace the language associated with the levels of cognition linked to the thinking habits of the discipline (Moje, 2007).

Step 3: Identification of the Thinking Habits

Thinking habits associated with a discipline involve students reading, reasoning, investigating, speaking, and writing in a way that is similar to professionals in their respective fields (McConachie et al., 2006). This is often the most ambitious element of disciplinary literacy for educators and students alike. This critical aspect of disciplinary literacy, therefore, necessitates a model for teachers and students of what thinking in a discipline looks and sounds like. It requires exposure to what Moje (2007) referred to as the discipline-appropriate habits of mind. When these habits of mind are made transparent, students are exposed to the semantics, syntax, linguistic features, text structures, and rhetorical devices linked to the specific discipline (Moje, 2007). As a result, students are capable of more clearly and competently identifying and focusing on the values unique to each discipline (McConachie et al., 2006).

As shown by the options in Table 3, an adapted version of a guided retelling protocol assures that the thinking habits and language of the discipline(s) are modeled and achieved. The revised guided retelling protocol can be tailored to each discipline or text and familiarizes students with the style of thinking of each discipline.

Step 4: Identification of the Visual Cues

Although retellings can be guided through verbal prompts in the guided retelling protocol, when delivered alone, the abstract nature of the prompts gives them the potential to result in a limited display of disciplinary literacy. For this reason, adding visuals to a guided retelling protocol is suggested. External visual material is one small step with very big gains for educators looking to improve comprehension of new material (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003). Visual representations promote recall of information from text and capture the nature of scaffolding instruction, especially concerning disciplinary literacy (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011).

Table 3
Guided Retelling Protocol: Thinking Habits

The process...
The problem that was identified...
One solution...
The text was structured...
The text was written by...
The author's intent was...
The text was written during...
The time period...
The conflict...
My analysis...
My hypothesis...
The equation...
___ is equivalent to...
The evidence...
The image shows...
I identified...
The environment...
It can be predicted that...
My evaluation...
The amount of ___ indicates...
The shape can be divided into...
The essential information...
___ is symbolic of...
The experiment...
The data suggest...
The stages...
The steps...
The relation...
I discovered...
My reasons...
It can be argued that...
The author claims...
The characteristics of...
One possible explanation is...

Several multimedia sources of visual cues to encourage disciplinary discourse exist. Select sources whose visuals are authentic representations of both the academic language and the thinking habits associated with the specific content objective. Table 4 offers a variety of options for an array of disciplines. These visuals support learners in producing a suitable, successful disciplinary retelling.

Putting It All Together

Now, it's time to piece these four steps together in a way that allows for ease and accuracy in teacher planning and student success. Table 5 provides first-, second-, and third-grade examples of the four planning steps and their ability to assist educators in constructing guided retelling opportunities that encompass the text, academic language, thinking habits, and visual cues for supporting the growth of disciplinary literacy in elementary classrooms.

Once the text, academic language, thinking habits, and visual cues are determined, the actual process of putting it all together and implementing guided retellings becomes quite simple!

- *Before the guided retelling:* The text is read and discussed. The content is taught. Interacting with informational text often requires that the text is read on multiple occasions (Yopp & Yopp, 2012). This involves students reading for

understanding and includes shared, guided, or independent reading opportunities (Moss, 2005).

- *During the guided retelling:* The academic language, thinking habits, and visual cues (see Table 5) are presented to the student in written or physical form. The student uses the predetermined academic language, thinking habits, and visual cues to retell their disciplinary thinking to peers and to the teacher or instructional aide. It is important to keep in mind that the verbal and visual cues are designed to minimize abstraction. Therefore, these oral and visual prompts require concrete representations that can be physically manipulated by students. The verbal and visual prompts might be displayed digitally on a tablet or on cardstock, compact dry-erase boards, or index cards of any size. The number of cues depends on the amount and complexity of content covered. Endless possibilities for creativity and sustainability exist when constructing the prompts, which helps make guided retellings not only effective but structured, motivating, and enjoyable for teachers and students, as well.

Here is a glimpse of what putting it all together might look and sound like in grade 3 social studies: After reading a flyer from the town government and discussing the importance of community recycling, third-grade students begin work with their group members, the teacher, or the instructional aide on a guided retelling. They first view the visual cues of a bar graph indicating recycling statistics and a “reduce, reuse, recycle” flow chart, all extracted from the original flyer. In addition to these visuals, the students attend to written sentence frames that contain the thinking habits and academic language aligned with the topic. Each of these pictorial and written visual prompts is placed in front of the student, and a guided retelling begins. One third grader might share an analysis of the flyer, or primary source artifact, that sounds a bit like this:

The text was written by the mayor's office in our town. The author's intent was to encourage people to reduce, reuse, and recycle. It is a reminder to citizens to use the recycling program. My analysis of the data suggests that only 63% of our town is participating in the recycling program. This flyer is one solution for fixing the problem.

Table 4
Multimedia Sources of Visual Cues

Photo	Map
Sketch	Diagram
Pie graph	Cartoon
Bar graph	Equation
Line graph	Blueprint
Calendar	Timer
Thermometer	Ruler
Geometric object	Timeline
Primary source document	Pictogram
Scatterplot	Flow chart
Periodical	Video
Clock	Scale
Flyer	Pamphlet
Painting	Cycle map

Table 5
A Model of Putting It All Together

Grade, content area, and topic	Step 1: Identification of the text	Step 2: Identification of the academic language	Step 3: Identification of the thinking habits (See Table 3.)	Step 4: Identification of the visual cues (See Table 4.)
Grade 1 math: Partition shapes/ equal shares	Corresponding math textbook pages OR a supplemental text, such as <i>Circus Shapes</i> by Stuart Murphy	<i>Circle, rectangle, square, halves, fourths, quarters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The shape can be divided into... ■ The image shows... ■ My analysis... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Geometric objects (circular, rectangular, and square objects) ■ Diagram (diagram of circles, rectangles, and squares segmented into equal shares as halves, fourths, and quarters)
Grade 2 science: The water cycle	Corresponding science textbook pages OR a supplemental text, such as <i>National Geographic Readers: Water</i> by Melissa Stewart	<i>Evaporation, condensation, precipitation, collection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The cycle... ■ The process... ■ The characteristics of... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cycle (image of the water cycle) ■ Flow chart (indicating the connections between each of the stages of the water cycle) ■ Photo (of each stage of the water cycle)
Grade 3 social studies: Cities and towns	A flyer from the local town government encouraging citizens to recycle OR a letter from the town mayor encouraging recycling	<i>Local government, services, resources, reduce, reuse, recycle</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The text was written by... ■ The author's intent was... ■ The data suggest... ■ One solution... ■ My analysis... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Local flyer (promoting recycling in the town) ■ Flow chart (image of the cycle within recycling) ■ Bar graph (indicating the benefits and challenges of recycling)

This sample includes evidence of disciplinary literacy and the text, academic language, thinking habits, and visual cues expected and noted in Table 5 during the preplanning process.

Conclusion

Guided retellings are a genuinely engaging, approachable, and likable method for immersing

teachers and students in the practice of disciplinary literacy. They provide access to the linguistic and epistemological processes aligned with the discipline, teach skills, bridge gaps, and provide the cultural and academic capital characteristic of college and career readiness and socially just teaching (Cochran-Smith, 1999; Moje, 2007). In this instance, guided retellings intentionally encourage the oral production of the academic language and thinking

habits of the disciplines and allow for boundless flexibility. It is a pedagogical tool that fits seamlessly into any instructional routine and is a plausible example of how disciplinary literacy can be accomplished in elementary classrooms. Guided retellings provide the perfect answer to the question, How have you been incorporating disciplinary literacy into your instruction?

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