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Nobody loves standards (and that's O.K.)

Category: Robert Pondiscio / June 14, 2012

I don't love standards. I doubt any teacher does.

I love literature. History. Science. I love grappling with ideas. I'm excited to know how things work and to share what I have learned with others, especially eager-to-learn children. Standards, by contrast, are unlovely, unlovable things. No teacher has ever summoned his or her class wide-eyed to the rug with the promise that "today is the day we will learn to listen and read to analyze and evaluate experiences, ideas, information, and issues from a variety of perspectives."

"Won't that be fun, boys and girls?!"

Well, no, it won't. Standards are a joyless way to reverse engineer the things we love to teach and do with kids. Thus I understand and sympathize if beleaguered teachers view Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as just one more damn thing imposed on them from on high, interposed between them and their students. But if they do, that's a shame. Because far from being just another compliance item on the accountability checklist, the Common Core State Standards, implemented well and thoughtfully, promise to both improve literacy and make teaching a lot more fun and significantly more rewarding.



No teacher has ever summoned his or her class to the rug with the promise that "today is the day we will learn to listen and read to analyze and evaluate experiences, ideas, information, and issues from a variety of perspectives. Won't that be fun boys and girls?!"

Photo by Fort Rucker.

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Kathleen Porter-Magee is a Bernard Lee Schwartz Policy Fellow and the Senior Director of the High Quality Standards Program at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, where she leads the Institute's work on state, national, and international standards evaluation and analysis.

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In the essential primary grades, where most of our educational battles are won or lost, CCSS promise to return sanity to the work of turning children into readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers. David Coleman, the principal architect of the English language arts standards, **recently said** CCSS “restores elementary teachers to their rightful place as guides to the world.” He’s exactly right, and here’s why:

Content is back

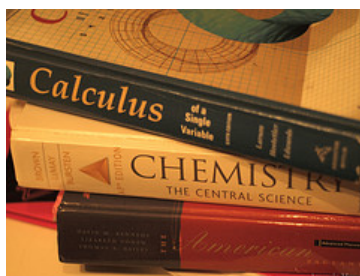
“A student never thanked me for teaching the main idea,” a teacher wrote to me recently. “But many thanked me for teaching them about animal migrations.” **CCSS remind us** to engage children not just with rote literacy skills work and process writing, but also, and especially, with real content—rich, deep, broad knowledge about the world in which they live. The conventional wisdom has become that CCSS “add nonfiction to the curriculum,” but that’s not right. Common Core *restores* art, music, history, and literature to the curriculum.

Why did they ever leave? Reading is “**domain specific**.” You already have to know at least a little bit about the subject—and sometimes a lot about the subject—to understand a text. The same thing is also true about creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving. Indeed, nearly all of our most cherished and ambitious goals for schooling are knowledge-dependent. Yet how many times have we heard it said that we need to de-emphasize teaching “mere facts” and focus on skills like critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving? CCSS rescue knowledge from those who would trivialize it, or who simply don’t understand its fundamental role in human cognition.

Coherence matters

Common Core asks not just for more nonfiction, but for a coherent, knowledge-rich curriculum in English language arts. Yes, there’s a difference. Perhaps the gravest disservice done to schoolchildren in recent memory is the misguided attempt to teach and test reading comprehension not just as a skill, but as a **transferable skill**—a set of tips and “reading strategies” that can be applied to virtually any text, regardless of subject matter.

Make no mistake: Building the foundations of early reading—teaching young children to decode written text—is indeed skill-based. The CCSS recognize this crucial truth by calling for the systematic teaching of explicit phonics skills. However, “the mistaken idea that reading [comprehension] is a skill,” University of Virginia cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham has written, “may be the single biggest factor holding back reading achievement in the country. Students will not meet standards that way. The knowledge-base problem must be solved.” CCSS aim to solve it by requiring a curriculum “intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades.” Let’s be clear: The standards are *not* a curriculum and do not pretend to be. But they have plenty to say about the importance of “building knowledge systematically” and choosing texts “around topics or themes that systematically develop the knowledge base of students.”



Putting history and science at the center of ELA instruction doesn’t exclude literature.
Photo by Amanda Munoz.

Sandra Stotsky **recently expressed her dismay** “that one badly informed person [lead Common Core author **David Coleman**] could single-handedly alter and weaken the entire public school curriculum in this country.” ~~But how do you weaken something that does not exist?~~ But at least at the K-5 level there is no curriculum. The fruitless focus on teaching reading as a content-neutral skill—find the main idea, identify the author’s purpose, compare and contrast—created conditions where what kids read

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doesn't matter; in that regime, "text" becomes a vehicle for practicing non-existent comprehension "skills." Big mistake. Putting history and science at the center of ELA instruction doesn't exclude literature. It repudiates the imperialism of trivial fiction that has debased ELA and deprived students of the knowledge they need to *understand* serious fiction—and just about everything else.

By asking teachers to focus their efforts on building knowledge coherently—and making it clear that doing so is fundamental to literacy—CCSS represent an essential breakthrough for reading comprehension and vocabulary growth. The intellectual DNA of Common Core ELA Standards belongs to **E.D. Hirsch, Jr.**, whose fundamental proposition has long held that a knowledge-rich classroom is a language-rich classroom.

CCSS invite elementary-school teachers to rethink the tedious regimen of content-free "mini-lessons" and empty skills practice on whatever reading materials happen to be at hand. "There is no such thing as doing the nuts and bolts of reading in Kindergarten through fifth grade without coherently developing knowledge in science, and history, and the arts. Period," Coleman said recently at an event run by **Common Core** (the non-profit organization). "It is the deep foundation in rich knowledge and vocabulary depth that allows you to access more complex text," he said.

Show what you know

Perhaps the most controversial new thrust of CCSS is their "reliance on text and evidence-based reading" for fiction as well as non-fiction. Too many people have tried to characterize this as diminishing the importance of fiction and literature. That is not the case—and close reading of text is necessary for both. The very worst that can be said about a reliance on text- and evidence-based reading and writing is that it's an overdue market correction.

As any teacher can tell you, it's quite easy to glom on to an inconsequential moment in a text and produce reams of empty "text-to-self" meandering using the text as nothing more than a jumping off point for a personal narrative. ("How do you feel about the character's decision to hit her friend?") The skill, common to most existing state standards, of "producing a personal response to literature" does little to demonstrate—or to build—a student's ability to read with clarity, depth, and comprehension. I understand the criticism of those who find the focus on texts and evidence as too narrow, but I don't agree. Indeed, it has always struck me as inherently condescending to assume that children cannot be engaged or successful unless they are reflecting upon personal experience nearly to the exclusion of other subjects.

In sum, Common Core strikes me as, at long last, the re-emergence of common sense in our classrooms. We're no longer ignoring what we know about reading comprehension and language development. And we're making elementary-school teachers the most important people in America. I still don't love standards. I never will. But the big ideas enshrined within CCSS were long overdue to be restored, renewed, or otherwise placed at the heart of ELA instruction from the first days of class in every American school.

Even Common Core opponents should be pleased.

Robert Pondiscio is the vice-president of the Core Knowledge Foundation and a former fifth-grade teacher.

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Robert Pondiscio

<<< It specifically and intentionally was excluded from Common Core's goals for student learning.

No, it was correctly identified as an essential condition of fundamental literacy. If children, from a very young age, do not develop broad background knowledge (and most won't without a coherent curriculum) then any effort to "read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience" will end not in literacy but frustration.

6 days ago

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Tom Hoffman

OK, to be more precise -- the standards themselves do not support the "portrait of students who meet the standards." A student can meet the standards without fulfilling all the aspects of the portrait. Whether or not this is would be pedagogically sound, it should not even be possible within the scope of the document. It is not consistent internally.

4 days ago in reply to Robert Pondiscio

Like



Robert Pondiscio

@Jenni What would you like to teach and like kids to know that CCSS would prevent?

6 days ago

Like Reply

**Robert Pondiscio****Tom Hoffman**

Hold on. You're saying, "Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience" is your idea of specific?

6 days ago

Like Reply

**Tom Hoffman**

I didn't say anything about specific. I'm saying that in Common Core ELA, developing "rich, deep, broad knowledge about the world in which (students) live" is simply not an objective. In the standards themselves. It could be, for example, as in the NCTE standard I cited. It specifically and intentionally was excluded from Common Core's goals for student learning.

6 days ago in reply to Robert Pondiscio

Like

**Jenni**

I am speechless. I am a former Core Knowledge 7th grade Science teacher. For you, of all people to be touting - in any way - the Common Core, makes me, well, ah, okay, speechless.

Though I was frequently frustrated by the cross curricular aspect of Core Knowledge (getting the History, English, Math and Science teachers all on the same topic for even a day, is more than difficult to wrangle), I found it rich and interesting and easy to align with our states standards. I often spent time ferreting out information on specific scientists as we covered specific topics in chemistry and life science, and giving the students a real glimpse into the minds of the people that came before them to prepare the way for them to learn. I tested (I didn't ASSESS) my students after each unit to make sure they were 'getting' the harder concepts (such as the Periodic Table) and my students did well above average on their state Core Curriculum tests.

I'm so glad I'm now at home schooling my own kids. With CCSS, teaching to the test would be my reality. Gone would be the days of foraging around in the lives of scientists or trampling around off-topic to watch a film to reinforce a concept or spending enough time covering the Periodic Table well enough to make sure everyone got it. Heck with that, I'd have to cover everything that would be on the test, or lose my job when my students weren't ASSESSED at a proper assessment 'interval'.

Teaching was once a profession in which the promise of (and necessity for) individualism and autonomy, drew those who enjoyed imparting wisdom to people younger than themselves in whatever way they found worked best. Now, all that remains for teachers today is to become assimilated into the collective called 'accountability' while figuring out a way to remain at least human enough to 'facilitate' classrooms of children glued to computers and iPads full of programs effortlessly guiding them toward their necessary place in the global workforce.

Though I fear my commentary here will simply be overlooked as the lunatic ravings of a dissenter for not including enough of the CCSS buzzwords I've picked up over the year and a half I've been studying and writing about this initiative (I devoted an entire blog to those!), I'm pretty sure many teachers

still in the classroom would agree with my thoughts.

Why otherwise intelligent people such as yourself seem so intent upon joining the Borg, I can't possibly comprehend on any level. The collective is NOT (nor has it ever been) the way, and I for one will not be assimilated.

6 days ago

Like Reply



Robert Pondiscio

Hey, Tom. My precise point is that the evidence you seek is not in the standards themselves, but in the abundantly clear, well-stated implementation guidelines. What you're asking for is beyond the scope of standards. It's like saying, "I've read the USDA's food safety standards, and it frustrates me that not one single standard tells me what should be on my grocery list!"

CCSS says quite clearly and in multiple places that it's NOT a curriculum but there must be a curriculum or else standards can't be met. Take a look at p. 33 ("Staying on Topic Within a Grade and Across Grades: How to Build Knowledge Systematically in English Language Arts K-5") for the best, most obvious example of this.

Robert

6 days ago

Like Reply



Tom Hoffman

Why on earth would what students are expected to know be outside the scope of the actual standards?

Why not something like this? "Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience." That's pretty similar to "rich, deep, broad knowledge about the world in which (students) live" and is exactly the kind of thing the CC standards pointedly omit. That section from the implementation guideline is nice enough, but it is not supported by the design of the standards themselves. It is simply general advice.

6 days ago in reply to Robert Pondiscio

Like



Tom Hoffman

I find it so remarkable -- and frustrating -- that nothing I read about these standards ever cites a single actual standard as evidence of their arguments. Which standards actually require "rich, deep, broad knowledge about the world in which (students) live?" What I see is a bunch of narrowly defined textual analysis tasks. They aren't even really skills. It is an assessment specification.

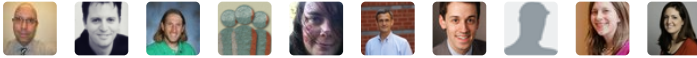
I'd also note that, as a teacher, I very much did appreciate a well designed set of standards. I actually believe in this stuff, which is why I find all the sloppiness and misdirection around CC so infuriating.

6 days ago

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