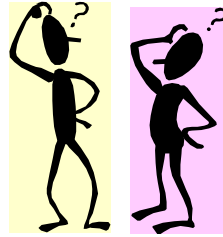




FIVE ISSUES WITH THE COMMON CORE: ELA



The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are making teaching and learning richer, more practical, and, in many ways, more fun! Yet, there are some issues in the CCSS that might cause us to look at teaching and learning more narrowly and rigidly than is healthy for our work with an increasingly diverse student population. Below is a brief discussion of five areas that deserve consideration if we are to avoid the CCSS becoming another academic prescription rather than a living opportunity for improved learning.

1. **Close Reading:** Should we have colder (little scaffolding) or warmer (lots of scaffolding) close reads? Timothy Shanahan and David Coleman seem to advocate for colder ones (December, 2012, Reading Today). IRA and Catherine Snow (2013) as well as Lily Wong-Fillmore (2012) seem to advocate for warmer ones. The problem with both approaches is that they represent “one size fits all.” There are two alternatives.

First, we can take a “differential approach.” For struggling readers attempting text significantly above their reading level, we should opt for warmer, first close reads. To do otherwise can cause these students to doubt their abilities as readers, if not bore them to death. At a minimum, colder first reads should be mitigated by limiting the quantity of text to be attempted. For students on or above grade level, we should be able to assign colder first reads with little trouble.

We can also take a “developmental approach.” The first few times, we help struggling students by walking them through a first read using text-handling or strategic reading strategies. Then, as they become better at using these strategies to tackle difficult text, we give them increasing independence to ensure eventual success with a first cold read of difficult text on their own later in the year.

Finally, it is suggested that close reading should include three reads. The recent Dunlosky et al study (2013) addresses the research on rereading. The paper includes bar graphs indicating significant growth for a first and second read, but the effects of a third and fourth read are nil. This suggests that the three close reads now being advocated might reasonably be limited to two for most classroom purposes.

2. **Text-Based Questions:** Finding evidence for answers in the text is a respected and necessary skill in the information age. However, a bias in the CCSS for text-based questions and answers may end up being limiting. There are two additional considerations.

First, understanding the context of the text – where it’s published, by whom, and for what purpose – is indispensable for effectively comprehending, interpreting, and using any information to be found in a piece of text.



Second, referential or “open-ended” questions that go well beyond the text - eliciting students’ points of view, personal responses, background knowledge, and evaluations - are crucial to meaningful student engagement and optimal classroom learning. There is evidence that when these types of questions are added to lessons that include typical text-based or “display” questions, students improve both in content acquisition as well as language proficiency (Long, 1983). In short, do we need to be more biased toward text-based questions than toward those that go beyond the text? Is “staying within the four corners of the text” all that we should be doing with our students? The research suggests a more balanced approach.

3. **Argumentative vs. Persuasive Writing:** To paraphrase David Coleman, “No one gives a wit about what you think!” That is, he argues to keep emotion out of expository writing and stick to the facts. Unfortunately, in the real world – whether in an op-ed piece, a business proposal, or a political speech – effective, indeed, compelling writing often includes subjective elements such as emotion, values, and personal experience. Research from the Carnegie Writing to Read study (2010) also notes that “personal responses” in writing have an effect size of 0.77 or almost two year’s growth compared to summarizing facts with an effect size of .52.

To train students systematically to eschew subjective features in their writing is to produce factual but sterile writers for the work place. We might do better to help students sort out objective from subjective elements in all writing, so that they will know how to produce as well as interpret writing for a variety of purposes.

4. **Automaticity:** Does rote learning have a role in the CCSS? It should. State officials have recently disparaged the “old” standards and the “old” California Standards Test as founded on “rote learning.” Yet, we know that deliberate, guided, rote practice leads to automaticity which supports higher-order learning and executive functioning in at least three areas.

First, we can’t process and think about what we’re reading if we are distracted by a struggle to decode letters, clusters of letters, and morphemes. Fortunately, elementary schools spend a lot of time on automaticity in phonics with good results for most students.

Second, we can’t think about problem-solving in Math if we are distracted by a struggle to add, subtract, multiply, and divide quickly and accurately. Yet, it is common for students to reach middle school or high school Algebra class with “holes” in their math facts. This means elementary schools need to do a better job at helping kids memorize their math facts – preferably orally first – if they are to be successful beyond arithmetic.

Finally, we can’t forget about writing. We can’t think about content and style in our own writing unless we are fluent with the motor skills necessary to produce letters and words smoothly and effortlessly in print. That is, without automaticity in printing, cursive, and keyboarding, students find encoding so laborious that they can’t think about the quality of what they’re writing. Since, the pencil and pen industries do not seem to be threatened with extinction because of technology, effective writers in 21st century need to be fluent in both handwriting and keyboarding. In fact, Bill Gates, in a recent interview by Charlie Rose (1/20/14) predicted that one of the next big trends in computing will be handwriting on tablets and handwriting recognition software.



However, given the technology required in the upcoming Smarter Balanced assessments, students will need to be fluent at keyboarding, probably, at least 35 words per minute. With the technology gap in the homes of wealthier vs. poorer students, fluency in keyboarding on state assessments now becomes a matter of social justice that schools have a responsibility to address immediately.

5. **Tiered Vocabulary:** The CCSS (Appendix A) promote a healthy focus on vocabulary development with an emphasis on tier 2 and tier 3 words. Both levels are indispensable to academic success. Perhaps that is why tier 1 words do not seem to be a part of the CCSS. The standards explain these two types of words in terms of "frequency of use," tier 3 being the least frequent and therefore the most difficult. Because of their lower frequency, the CCSS advocates that we teach these terms explicitly, as they are unlikely to be acquired in the course of pleasure reading. There are two problems with this approach.

The first is that these "tiers" are derived from a book by Martin Joos called *The Five Clocks* (1962). In it, he outlines five "registers," "styles," or "levels" of language use. These have come to be known as "tiers." However, the vocabulary characteristic of different "tiers" is not based on frequency but "register." That is, there are five tiers or "social registers" recognized in English. The first is "intimate" and includes a kind of "baby talk" spoken to babies, pets, and lovers. The second is "casual" and includes everyday, colloquial, and slang language. The third is "consultative" or the kind of standard American English (SAE) spoken between doctor and patient or teacher and student. The fourth is "formal" and includes the language used by experts and specialists or in formal settings. The fifth is "frozen" or "static" register that includes language used in the Pledge of Allegiance, religious ritual, courtrooms, fraternities and sororities, and formal meetings (Robert's Rules of Order). Tier 1, 2, and 3 words are roughly equivalent to casual, consultative, and formal registers. Even kindergartners and first graders can understand this concept and have fun playing with synonyms of different registers.

The second issue is that recognizing tier 1 words has an "inclusive" and often "invitational" effect on students. They willingly engage with tier 2 and tier 3 words when teachers have them "grow" lists of all three tiers of synonyms in class. To ignore tier 1 is to exclude the language that many students bring to school which forms the basis for initial speaking and writing fluency. To validate it as a legitimate register promotes an "additive" instead of "replacive" approach to language learning in the classroom. And recognizing student voice in this way always means more student engagement.

Addressing these five issues can only make our work with the CCSS more powerful and effective with our students, especially with those at risk of struggling the most with the higher demands that this new curriculum places upon them. Let's not let the CCSS be a destination but rather an opportunity to get it more right this time.



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