

Literacy Transformation Through The Common Core: Finding our Heartbeat

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Abstract — For over a decade reading mandates have caused reading to be taught as its own subject, isolated from the other language arts, often in place of writing, content area learning, and arts integration. With the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (2010) there is potential for literacy teachers to rethink the curriculum used, methods of instruction, and how to provide individual and diverse learners with meaningful opportunities to use literacy to learn. If teachers take ownership and follow their expertise they can implement a more truly comprehensive and integrated learning experience that would prepare students for lifelong learning that uses literacy to learn content knowledge, sciences, math, art and music.

Over the last decade, literacy education has been stuck in a “skills-based, content free approach to learning” (Munson, 2012; p. 14). In other words teachers haven’t been teaching literacy, they’ve been mandated to teach reading void of real application, content learning, and integration. As a result of these mandates, it is common practice for teachers to follow mandated scripted reading programs with fidelity; step by step, page by page (Allington & Pearson, 2011), relying on teacher-proof materials, whole class instruction and independent practice. Through such scripted programs we are losing readers and burning out teachers (Gallagher, 2009). It is time to rethink how our reading curriculum and instruction supports how children learn not just to read but to be literate and our role as reading teachers in their development of lifelong literacy.

The Common Core State Standards or CCSS (2010) present a timely opportunity for teachers to rethink not just reading, but the larger goals and purpose of literacy education. School districts are currently training and preparing teachers for these new standards. County and state departments are also providing ongoing workshops and trainings to inform teachers and administrators about the new standards. Unfortunately training will not bring about the necessary change or revive teaching and learning. What is needed is more recognition of teacher expertise and active participation by the teachers in rethinking and transforming curriculum. Only with active involvement will we move from where we are currently towards meeting the goals of the Common Core. This radical transformation of our curriculum, in which content is at the core and literacy and language are tools for understanding the core, will require ongoing support and dialogue. Teachers

within schools and districts need to have real conversations about how they will help learners reach the goals of the Common Core.

Randy Bomer, former president of NCTE, writes that this historic, national event presents a critical time for us to change the way we are teaching literacy; to re-energize and re-focus on what we want our learners to really be able to do with literacy now and in the future (2011). It is important that we all recognize that these standards will never be enacted or realized the same way in all states. To breathe life back into teaching, teachers’ expertise of curriculum and instruction, and their knowledge of their students and communities must be at the heart. It is the teacher’s ability to act in pedagogically sound ways that respond to the needs of learners will determine how much the Common Core will be able to improve the quality of education.

STOP AND BREATHE

I will be the first one to admit that political changes in literacy education have left me uninspired. When I think about my career as a teacher educator, I realize that for over a decade the *No Child Left Behind* Act NCLB (2001); subsequent *Reading First* (2003); and *Striving Readers* (2004) legislation have narrowed how reading is defined, assessed and taught. There has been a tight rein on reading achievement and skills focused narrowly on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. The over-emphasis on assessing and teaching reading has stripped away the experience of learning to read. The materials and methods many teachers used to teach reading during this time, are far removed from what and how we actually read. Even, the new legislation, *Race to the Top* (2009) with its emphasis on student growth cannot seem to shift the privileging of direct instruction, testing, and achievement (Bomer, 2011).

Following a scripted program has stripped away our decision making skills and minimized our ability to take control or teach in a way that is relevant to our learners. Not only are we disempowered but our readers too lack motivation and willingness to read. Look at the decline in readers after third grade. Reading teachers have to recognize that we need to do better at promoting lifelong literacy and real passion for reading (Gallagher, 2009). We have to find our heartbeat.

The transition to the Common Core is potentially a wake-up call for teachers and a second chance for students to realize their literacy identities. In the implementation of the standards teachers have opportunities to rekindle their enthusiasm and purpose for teaching by using literacy to engage in meaningful and purposeful learning. Such learning will only motivate and

inspire our students to want to learn. This means, addressing the entirety of language arts and reconnecting reading to writing and using both as keys to unlock content area learning (Coleman, 2012). When we unlock content areas and embrace a more comprehensive literacy view. Content areas will be the core and take priority over skill-based instruction (Munson, 2012).

We need to rethink what we want readers to do on their own with literacy, we need to help them use literacy to learn, and foster deep thinking and critical learning. We need to bring back innovative literacy practices, use new literacies, and foster personal engagement in literacy as an integrated and interactive activity that fosters thinking and new ideas. We need to change so our students will grow.

MOTIVATION TO CHANGE

As a literacy teacher educator, I am often disappointed and discouraged by the type of reading children are doing in school and the professional development/training teachers have had to participate in to learn to teach reading, and how to teach a program or reading skills. Training teachers in how to use program materials rarely improve the quality or frequency of reading. Mostly this is because teacher knowledge and decision making is stripped away, and they are unable to advocate on behalf of their students or teach in flexible, individualized ways (Allington & Pearson, 2011).

In former university partnership schools, I have acted as a consultant to principals trying to make sense of reading test scores, identifying gaps, and targeting areas of instruction. Although my personal goal was to empower teachers and promote lifelong literacy, the end result always focused on fragmented parts of reading; phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension disconnected from the very act of literacy itself. It seems what was wanted was a quick fix or strategy to ensure every child will be able to perform well on the test.

I believe many teachers have become disengaged or discouraged from teaching reading. What is motivating about a reading curriculum that is so off-balance; in which reading is separate from writing, and disconnected from content learning. It is very common for children in elementary school to experience a 90-minute literacy block and math routinely with maybe science or social studies. Music and art are optional, dependent on the goals of the district, school, or community. Is it any wonder that learners are also disengaged and unmotivated?

It is time to move towards an integrated, balanced and comprehensive model of learning (Wixson, 2012) that will re-engage and motivate students as well as teachers. To do this we will need to reintegrate the curriculum to include all of the disciplines, including the arts. With a more integrated curriculum readers will have authentic and meaningful reasons to comprehend and communicate, as well as think critically. To return to an integrated model means knowing what is best pedagogically and developmentally for our children in our classrooms. The disciplines or content areas (science, social studies, and arts) give learners real reasons to wonder, ask questions, pursue answers, and foster or discover interests and

talents. We need to breathe life into reading again so that it once again is part of a meaningful, lived experience that changes the quality of a child's life, makes them want to read, write, talk and think differently.

The focus is on literacy, not on reading skills, practicing reading or testing well. We have to show children how their lives are constantly changed by print – all kinds of print: Novels, comic books, blogs, informational texts, companion websites, and writing. It is time to remember why we read and write. Children and teachers need to think critically about the experience of language and remember that we read and write, view and represent our ideas, talk and listen to ideas for our own purpose. Reading teachers are language arts teachers and we use language and literacy as tools to learn and develop new perspectives. It is what fuels the talk and writing that lead to learning. We have to wake up and shake up our classrooms, our students, and ourselves.

REFOCUS ON THE CHANGE

As described in, *Pathways to the Common Core* (2011), Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman, provide an opportunity to think critically about our reading curriculum and how we might grow and encourage growth from the implementation of these new standards. Although the standards aim for national goals and expectations for learning, Calkins believes these new standards will invite positive changes to curriculum just in the emphasis on high-level comprehension skills and shift back from NCLB's focus on decoding and low-level literacy skills (Calkins et al, 2012, p.29). We need to recognize these national standards as an ideal. Realistically it is impossible to achieve national equality because of the diversity in culture, ethnicity and language (Bomer, 2012). Good news is that these standards leave room for local interpretation and choice in how the standards are taught (McLaughlin & Overtuf, 2012). (See Table 1: Reasons to Embrace the Common Core.)

The Common Core has shifted the focus from the National Reading Panel recommendations and placed reading along the other Language Arts. Standards include reading literature, reading informational text, reading foundational skills, writing, speaking and listening, and language. The emphasis will now be on how well learners can use literacy to comprehend and communicate ideas that reflect critical thinking. Common Core promotes a broader view of being literate and using language to accomplish other things. Skills and strategies matter but only as the means to communicating and understanding something larger and more relevant. It's about time to really engage our learners in real world language and literacy that will connect to real world learning.

Framed to meet College and Career Readiness CCR goals for students the standards state that all students should develop independence, build strong content knowledge, and respond to varying demands of audiences, tasks, purposes, and disciplines. Students also need to comprehend and critique, value evidence, use technology and digital media strategically and capably. They need to develop an understanding of other perspectives and cultures (McLaughlin & Overtuf, 2012). This is a huge shift away from being able to read fluently and be strategic in our comprehension.

Table 1 - Reasons to Embrace CCSS
Pathways to the Common Core (2011) provides a list of reasons to embrace CCSS.

Reasons to Embrace Common Core State Standards	
1.	Provides urgently needed wake up call.
2.	Emphasizes much higher-level comprehension skills than previous standards
3.	Places equal weight on reading and on writing
4.	Stresses the importance of critical citizenship
5.	Emphasizes reading complex texts
6.	Provides a clear design with central goals and high standards
7.	Conveys that intellectual growth occurs through time, across years and across disciplines.
8.	Calls for proficiency, complexity and independence
9.	Supports cross-curricular teaching
10.	Emphasizes access for all students to this work
11.	Aims to put every state on the same measuring stick.
12.	Respects the professional judgment of classroom teachers.

To reach these goals the standards begin in kindergarten and span through high school. Across the grades there is a heavier emphasis on critical thinking, analysis, and the range and content of student reading. Perhaps it is better to consider these as ideals for what we would like students to be able to do rather than standards we check off. Reading implies a heavy emphasis on the ability to comprehend complex texts. Writing is less about personal narrative and more about informational writing (Rothman, 2012).

An interesting part of the Common Core is that although the standards have been mapped out the implementation has not. So we have goals and standards but not a clear path. Teachers need to be on the front line of how to accomplish these goals which is above all accelerating student's literacy development. What is needed is a continuous system of improvement of instruction and increased personal and shared accountability for raising student achievement. Teachers are going to be integral in setting goals for improving language arts performance. They are the ones that know the strengths and weaknesses of their current reading programs and they are the ones who know the students and how to engage them in learning. They will also be the ones who will find evidence of learning (Lee, 2012).

Energy, time and funding will be needed to align goals for language arts K-12. All learners will need to read informational and narrative text, write for argument and information, and higher-order thinking and comprehension. Ideally you will need to provide students with opportunities for increased speaking and listening opportunities as well. It will not be an easy transition. My hope is that it will be an engaging and motivating one for teachers and students. If we can all embrace the change as freedom to learn I believe the change will be positive.

The only way I can see the Common Core transforming curriculum, instruction, and student learning is if teachers get immediately involved in the implementation of the standards. There will need to be mapping and planning so that there is a consistent path for diverse learners to reach the career and

college goals. This vision will never be accomplished through a formulaic adoption, teacher trainings, or a mandated program. It needs to begin by an evaluation of existing curriculum, an infusion of 21st century literacies, multimodal texts, and the arts. How this gets enacted will look differently at different schools based on student strengths and needs and teacher knowledge and experience as well as the resources and choices available to teachers and schools to make critical decisions about what is right for their students.

How the Common Core is enacted will require constant work and vision. But the vision needs to reflect your students, families and communities and not some universal ideal of students. You can't be passive. Just remember we are exchanging the mind-numbing work of preparing students for tests or delivering scripted instruction with the engaging, exciting work of making language arts meaningful, relevant and thought provoking by integrating content areas. It will require professional judgment and active involvement on your part. Ideally there will be shared decision-making and collaboration.

Cleaver (2011) suggests that teachers need to consider the learning experience itself and help students delve deeper into understanding. This means closing the textbook, scaffolding learning and moving learners to independence. We need to foster interdisciplinary studies, celebrating learning – academic and other.

It is time to evaluate the type of thinking we are asking our students to do in everyday learning. We may have to give up control to our students, think outside the box, and trust in our students' ability to ask meaningful questions and engage in learning (Pandya, 2012).

Begin by reading the goals and standards and what you are expected to know and what learners are expected to do. Depending on the state you are teaching in there will be different degrees of change. Look specifically at your particular grade level, and the grades before and after. Next you will need to think of ways you can use language arts to enhance comprehension and communication for real learning. Think about working collaboratively to integrate language arts into content areas. You are going to have to integrate the standards and think broadly about what children can do to show their thinking and capabilities. Your literacy block will now include or expand to include content area learning. (See Table 2: How to Approach the CCSS)

Change cannot happen all at once, over one summer or as a result of one training. The change will be reflected in small, purposeful steps like a teacher adding or changing a key text or additional genre or simply by considering a new integrated experience. Working together to understand the standards and making our comprehensive programs more engaging and cognitively challenging will be both the benefit and catalyst for more change.

USE YOUR EXPERIENCE

We can no longer hope that test scores reflect engagement in learning and a mutual love of literacy. Our students need technical know-how as well as creativity, insight, adaptability, and the capacity for expansive thinking. For this to happen

students have to be dynamically engaged (Bartholomew, 2012). I would argue that teachers deserve the same level of engagement and see the relevance of preparing students K-12 for Career and College Readiness by meeting Common Core's goals and grade level expectations. Educators need to act quickly and get involved, before others predetermine the curriculum. Teachers and students need a change and a choice to show what they can do. We need to share our successes and also what is not working. It is my hope that CCSS provides relief and motivation for positive change and lifelong learning that in fact prepares our children for their future.

Table 2 - How to Approach the CCSS for ELA K-5 (McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012).

How to Approach the Common Core State Standards for ELA K-5
1. Read standards within each category
2. Read vertically K-5 to understand what students need to know
3. Within each standards read horizontally to fully understand what the standard encompasses.
4. Know how and why to teach for understanding for your particular students. This includes addressing prior knowledge of learners, the use of formative assessments to guide instruction, small group instruction, and making content area instruction comprehensible by using hands-on experiences and artifacts that extend on their prior knowledge and increasing their individual engagement in learning.

It is my sincere hope that change comes collaboratively with administrators, teachers, parents, and students working together to influence what learning will be under the new Common Core. We have to figure out what is meaningful for all. We have to be patient. Changes from current curriculum to CCSS will take time. We, as literacy educators can't be rushed and we can't allow it to be fed to us. We need to be part of the transformation and reinvention of our curriculum step by step, day by day – until we see the sparkle in our learners' eyes and we reap the benefits of feeling that we are truly teaching.

Ask yourself what brings you joy in teaching literacy? What content areas motivate you to ask questions and search for understanding? What motivates and engages your learners? Re-examine what is working and stop what is not. Close the textbooks, foster discussion, provide more time to talk, reflect and question. Only then will you help your children think deeply, read widely and communicate well. This is what we need to use the Common Core to do for us. To give us an opportunity to stop and breathe, refocus, find our motivation and heartbeat.

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