



My 10 Greatest “Ah-ha” Moments in Working with the Core

By Sarah Brown Wessling

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Like so many teachers around the country, the Common Core State Standards have become a crucial needle in my instructional compass. While the standards themselves won't define me as a teacher (they were never intended to do this), they do play a prominent role in how I design instruction. I come from a state (Iowa) that was the last holdout in developing any kind of state standards, so I had been brought up to see standards as some kind of condemnation of my professionalism and ability to know what is best for my students. Yet, I've come to a place where I see the helpfulness of standards, where I recognize how they give us a common language in which to talk about common purposes. As I've worked to interpret the Core in a way that honors its mission and the needs of my students simultaneously, I've had mini-epiphanies along the way. Here are some of my favorites that I hope will help you along your journey as well.

1. Common isn't same: the standards are not curriculum.

So often, we educators hear the word “common” and assume this means the same. But having common standards does not mean that we have common curriculum, or that we should be common teachers. Certainly there are advantages to consistency in what students are learning, but that need for steadiness does not translate to everyone turning to the same page in the same textbook at roughly the same time. In fact, the Introduction to the CCSS reminds: “Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards.” The standards purport what students should achieve, leaving the materials and means to school districts and teachers.

2. States that adopt the CCSS are obligated to make them 85% of their state standards.

Up to 15% of each state's standards can then be individualized to meet specific needs. The writers of the CCSS also understand that from state to state, there must be room for flexibility to honor the

interests and work that individual states may already be engaged in. This is why Minnesota uses its 15% to include media literacy and media production standards. This is why New York wants first graders to be able to measure time and money in their standards, among other additions.

3. All roads lead to algebra.

One important note about the process for writing the standards is the fact that they are internationally benchmarked. That is, a standard was only included when its “mastery was essential for college and career readiness in a 21st century, globally competitive society.” TIMSS researchers discovered in 2007 that while other countries worked with fewer concepts in the primary grades, then systematically built on them year after year, many places in the United States would, for example, teach whole numbers many times throughout a student experience. Thus, in an effort to get students ready for algebraic functions (which is situated as a gatekeeper to all other kinds of mathematical functions) they focus on fewer skills but with greater depth. In short, fewer concepts early with greater mastery make algebra more accessible.

4. The road to algebra is traversed through fractions.

At the recent ECS National Forum on Education Policy, I had the opportunity to listen to one of the principal authors of the Core, David Coleman, as he spoke of a clear and simple pathway to prepare students in primary grades for algebra. While the Math Standards include algebraic thinking even in Kindergarten, he reminded us that the greatest predictor of algebraic agility is one’s ability to understand fractions. As a mother of early elementary students, I realize that what he noted was profound: you must understand everything you can about whole numbers and be able to transfer that knowledge; then you do the same with a focus on fractions; and finally, you’re ready for algebra.

5. The math mantra: focus, coherence, rigor.

David Coleman used these words to talk about the Math Standards at the ECS National Forum on Education Policy. We need to focus on fewer concepts. We need coherence so that we’re teaching for mastery instead of re-teaching year after year. Finally, we need to approach these concepts with more rigor. Often the word “rigor” is troubling for me. Maybe it’s because my mind immediately goes to “rigor mortis” and then I think of lifelessness, but in this case, I prefer to think of rigor as teaching for transfer. In other words, we want our students to understand a math concept so well that they can transfer that knowledge to other mathematical operations or scenarios. The point is not just to get a right answer; the point is to understand functions.

6. Literacy in all content areas isn’t just a responsibility, it’s a gift.

The notion of reading in the content areas isn’t new. Yet, it can be met with confusion about why non-English teachers are being “asked to teach reading.” The beautiful thing about the Literacy Standards for History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, is that they are, as David Coleman says, “restoring [all] teachers as purveyors of the world.” In many cases, students have

either read narratives (stories) or textbooks. What I love about these standards is that they empower my colleagues in all disciplines to see the power of primary, non-fiction texts. It reminds us that all disciplines are grounded in literacy and just because a student can follow the plot in a story, doesn't mean they're ready to make sense of an article in *Scientific American*. But who better to teach students how to maneuver these texts than the teacher-scientists who are with them each day? The charge for more – substantially more – non-fiction in the standards becomes the collective responsibility of an entire school.

7. Text complexity honors my instincts about kids and what they read.

For many years, I've been confused about Lexile scores (a number that teachers often use to match the difficulty of a text with a student's reading level) because I always sensed texts with less sophisticated vocabulary or sentence structure (which gives them a lower Lexile score) wouldn't necessarily make them easier reads. Now, my instincts don't have to be instincts any more. Appendix A of the CCSS for ELA and Literacy offers us a three-pronged approach to determining how complex a text actually is: 1) the sophistication of vocabulary and structure; 2) the complexity of nuances that only "attentive human readers" can surmise; 3) the readiness of the reader to confront this text. This affirms how important it is to know our students and consider their experiences and readiness as we scaffold them through increasingly complex texts.

This isn't to say that paying attention to indicators like Lexile scores aren't important, they are. In fact, Appendix A of the ELA and Literacy standards explains that the reading difficulty of texts has been steadily declining and that "only AP course readings had vocabulary levels equivalent of those in newspapers of the time." Once we choose the appropriately complex text, then it's also up to us to incite our students to interact with it in robust ways.

8. ELA Appendix B is not a reading list.

Maybe you're saying, "there are appendices too?" Yes. The CCSS for ELA and Literacy comes with three revealing appendices that offer research, exemplar texts and student writing exemplars. I've found these to be incredibly illustrative in coming to terms with what achievement in the Standards looks like. Appendix B offers a comprehensive list of texts that would be on target for grade level reading. It's easy to look at this list and think it's a suggested reading list—that the texts listed are the ones that should be read. Using what we know about text complexity helps us understand that these are suggested readings and that while many of them may make it into our classrooms, our job is to find similarly complex texts that meet the needs of our learners.

9. Evidence-based reading and writing does not just mean writing reports.

Whether looking at the ELA or Literacy Standards, you'll quickly notice the importance, the insistence, on using textual evidence to support both reading and writing. I'm a strong advocate for the role of the reader's experience and the writer's voice in literacy and there have been moments in my work

with the Standards when I've wondered if the learner has been taken out of the transaction between the reader/writer and the text. One way to maintain the reader/writer presence is to seek out and implement genres which require a precise attention to text that have value beyond school. In other words, a report is usually a genre used specifically for school. But what forms do evidence-based reports take outside of school? This is our opportunity to ask our students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of contexts: an art critique, a grant proposal, a blog entry, a lab report, or podcast, each of which also requires students to practice analysis.

10. Empowerment in implementation means knowing what to keep and what to let go.

Shoulders can quickly get heavy in education. It can feel like every new idea is added to the heap of "everything to accomplish in a single day." In order to implement the Core with success we'll not only need to make sense of what it is, but we'll also need to empower ourselves to determine what we let go of. Whether we decide to let go of a textbook we've always taught from in favor of a primary text or to keep the narrative piece of writing that sparks creativity in our students, we must remember that when our choices are purposeful we'll find ways to intersect the Common Core Standards with the integrity of our classrooms.

CCSS Web Resources:

Common Core State Standards

This site is the "home" of the standards. Here you will find the standards, their appendices and corresponding resources to help create a foundational understanding of the CCSS.

<http://www.corestandards.org>

Teaching Channel Videos

Tch has more than 100 free videos inside classrooms where teachers are using the Core Standards.

https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos?categories=topics_common-core

Smarter Balanced Assessment

This is one of the two assessment consortiums, which is writing the corresponding tools for assessing CCSS.

<http://www.smarterbalanced.org>

PARCC Assessment

This is one of the two assessment consortiums, which is writing the corresponding tools for assessing CCSS.

<http://www.parcconline.org>

Achieve the Core

This site, run by Student Achievement Partners, has tools, articles, and resources to help illuminate the Core.

<http://www.achievethecore.org>