

Position Statements on the Common Core and Pathways to Achieving the Standards

BY LUCY CALKINS

Based on long-term goals of college and career readiness for all students, as well as global readiness, the Common Core State Standards call for a general ramping-up of expectations for students at all levels, and specifically an attention to higher-level thinking skills as they play out in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) has studied the CCSS closely in order to understand their infrastructure, locate the standards that enable a host of other proficiencies, and adjust curricular plans in order to address potential instructional gaps.

“As challenging as it must have been to write and finesse the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, that accomplishment is nothing compared to the work of teaching in ways that bring all students to these ambitious expectations. The goal is clear. The pathway is not.”

—Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth and Christopher Lehman,
Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement

“When implementing the Common Core, it’s important not to simply add this initiative onto a host of others, but instead to harness the parts of the Common Core that will you raise student achievement, so that regardless of what happens at your state level, your school and district glean the best out of these standards. It has to be a mission, not a mandate.”

—Lucy Calkins, speaking at Teachers College, Columbia University

We, the TCRWP Community, take the position that:

- The Common Core State Standards issue a critically important challenge to all of us to work together with enormous resolve to accelerate students’ levels of achievement and to teach important skills such as deep comprehension, writing in a range of genres, problem solving, and close interpretative reading. The call for increased attention to writing and to content literacy is especially overdue and welcome.
- It is appropriate that the CCSS states, “the Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (CCSS, p 6). What’s needed is an all-hands-on-deck effort to study how best to create pathways to achieve the Common Core. There will be no one “right answer” to the question of how a school or a district needs to shift its priorities and methods so as to bring its students closer to

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the expectations of the Common Core, as schools and classrooms will come from different places and will have different resources to draw upon. If teachers and principals are going to be accountable for results, it is important that they have the responsibility to make decisions based on data analysis and understandings of the capacities and resources upon which they can draw.

- We understand that some individuals and agencies, such as Achieve, have suggested that states working with PARCC—half the teachers in America-- should implement the approach to reading and writing instruction that is illustrated by a widely circulated lesson on The Gettysburg Address. New York State, for example, required that any one devising curriculum for the state must pledge allegiance to that image of teaching and learning, and the Tri-State region (NY, RI and Mass) have devised a quality-review rubric for assessing all schools' literacy instruction that appears grounded in this one image of curriculum. Our stance is that those who suggest this kind of instruction will pilot this idea in a school, or even in a cluster of schools, we look forward to observing this image of instruction in those schools (especially if they are high-need schools). But given that there has been no large-scale implementation of this image of curriculum (or of the many proposed modules that are designed to his specifications), we believe it would be premature to channel half the teachers in the nation to work towards this untested image of literacy curriculum. We are skeptical because these methods are reminiscent of those that underlie traditional high school literature classes and Basal textbooks. Two thirds of the nation's schools have used these methods, leading to NAEP scores that have flat lined and to a nation where the average college graduate reads one book a year, and to mountains of data suggesting that approach does not work (Allington, 2012). Asking all students to inch painstakingly through a text that the teachers selects as "worthy," answering DOK level 1 and 2 text-

dependent questions may be one optional method of bringing all students in a classroom to the ambitious levels of the CCSS, but we question why New York State, Rhode Island and Massachusetts would think now is the time to call off research and dialogue and experimentation into best practices in favor of institutionalizing one approach.

- Some interpret the CCSS as calling for a huge emphasis on close reading, and we caution that there are many definitions of close reading out there, and simply adopting the term will not ensure success. The standards actually do not use that specific term. What the standards call for to achieve College and Career Readiness in Reading is that students must "read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text" (Anchor Standard 1, p. 10). However, we welcome the emphasis that some interpreters of the CCSS are placing on the importance of a close study of short shared texts and we wholeheartedly agree that the Standards should lead to, "students also acquir[ing] the habits of reading independently and closely, which are essential to their future success" (p. 10). Engaging in a close study of short shared texts has always been one effective method for teaching transferable strategies for reading actively. Debate among reading experts has focused partly on the current attention that is being given to close reading as a reaction against personal response. We suggest that all readers inevitably bring themselves to texts, and that they also need to learn to see more in the texts they read. The TCRWP believes, then, that personal response is inevitable and crucial but also agrees that some methods of teaching reading have allowed students to jump far away from texts in ways that are problematic, spending most of their time recounting personal connections. We believe that close reading of one text will be especially valuable if the instruction is designed to help students transfer and apply the work done with one text to other texts. We also caution teachers to recall that in the end, the most important challenge is to support students in becoming avid and expert lifelong readers, in reading a tremendous volume, in initiating reading in their own lives.
- While there will be shifts in curriculum that are necessary in supporting students to meet the Common Core State Standards, it is our position that because schools and districts are specific, with their own specific curricular histories, a school will need to self-assess and decide which shifts in curriculum are necessary for that particular school. For example:
 - If your students have had no writing instruction, your school will need to begin a coherent systematic approach

to teaching opinion/argument, informative/explanatory, and narrative writing to bring students to the level of exemplar student work included in Appendix C of the Common Core.

- If your writing instruction has focused primarily on teaching narrative, your school will need to make sure to shift curriculum to balance instruction between the three types of writing: opinion/argument, informative/explanatory, and narrative.
 - If your students are reading snippets of text, your school will need to accelerate the volume of reading. Students must be reading great quantities of text if they are to reach the expectations of the Common Core.
 - If your school has not been tracking student progress, you will need forms of assessment such as running records and reading responses to make student understanding and progress visible. You will want to use the results and data generated by your assessments to inform your instruction.
 - If your instruction in reading has focused primarily on fiction, your school will need to shift to a balance between fiction and informational reading. Students need to move up the levels of text difficulty to read at grade-level text complexity in all genres.
 - If little meaningful reading and writing is happening in content classes, then your school will need to ensure that students read high quality texts and do significant writing in social studies and science as well as ELA.
- The challenge of implementing the CCSS is not so much about curriculum compliance as about how best to accelerate student progress. We need a system of continuous improvement in schools. Part of this probably should involve tapping the local expertise. That is, at every grade level there will be teachers who are grade-level experts on a specific area of curriculum. A school will be wise to tap that expertise.
 - Performance assessments have the potential to play a powerful role in accelerating learning. Hattie’s research has shown that learners profit from adopting concrete, crystal clear goals and from receiving clear feedback (Hattie, 2009). Teachers can help students work towards those goals and can give that sort of feedback when teachers use performance assessments to clarify goals for themselves and students. The tasks are important, but the learning progressions that result from

studying student work and describing the differences between one level of work and another are especially helpful. Although some suggest that it is particularly important for teachers to spend time generating text-dependent questions, we think it is far more important for teachers to study student work, construct and adapt learning progressions that detail the differences between novice and proficient work, use exemplars to clarify next steps for learners, and so forth. It is also crucially important for students to be engaged in this work continually, so they are invested partners in goal-setting and creating action plans in order to develop internal accountability and ensure the acceleration of achievement.

- Although schools will need to make decisions about how best to begin implementing the CCSS, we believe that one thing is non-negotiable. Students must learn to read and write and think critically in the content areas as well as ELA.
- There is a lot of talk about the value of a “braided” curriculum. That term needs further definition and some sites of successful implementation before we take a position on it. If a braided curriculum means that students are asked to transfer and build upon what is taught in one curriculum area while working in another area, we believe this has enormous power to accelerate student learning. If a braided curriculum is all about application, transference, and assessment-based learning, if it asks teachers and students to stand on the shoulders of prior work, then we believe a braided curriculum is critically important. On the other hand, if a braided curriculum means that students are always writing about a teacher’s assigned task on a teacher assigned topic or theme, with all of reading, writing, speaking and listening always harnessed to the teacher’s topic of the day or text of the day, then we think it needs to be regarded as one way to design teaching and learning, and we caution that kids need best practices in skill instruction, regardless of the thematic choices that teachers assign.

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