

Shedding Light on Our Work through the Common Core State Standards

BY W. HARRISON LITTLE



In reflecting on my time in grade school, it occurred to me recently that the majority of my teachers successfully *tricked* me into learning. I suppose the word “trick” isn’t entirely fair, as it carries a degree of negative connotation, and my teachers certainly had my best interest at heart. They aspired to make learning fun and were successful in this endeavor. I remember with great fondness dressing up in period-appropriate garb for Colonial Days, charting a road trip across continental America, and writing my very own newspaper based on my “research” on the chimpanzee.

But I also remember feelings of frustration and disparagement. Mere months, even weeks, after completing each of these projects, my newfound body of knowledge began to slip away. Despite my best efforts, I could no longer remember the dates significant to America’s earliest peoples or the dietary restrictions of primates. I was convinced that there was something wrong with me, that I was somehow *broken*. What I realize now, that I failed to recognize at the time, is that all of these projects were just vehicles. And although the facts and fig-

ures faded, the skills I had acquired stayed with me. I was both relieved and excited when I had this revelation in early adulthood. But why hadn't one of my teachers explained this to me when I was a child? Suffice to say such knowledge would have spared me stress and doubt.

All of this was fresh in my mind when I made the transition from independent school to public school and essentially became a new teacher for the second time. I was faced with a whole new set of guidelines, parameters, and expectations, not to mention a new federal initiative. Frankly, I found the Common Core State Standards fascinating. When I had begun teaching the *first* time, I had been given a list of books to choose from and told what genres to cover. *What* to teach was left entirely up to me, though. There really was no curriculum and, as all language arts teachers know, no textbook. In all honesty, this was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, I had a great deal of autonomy and creative license. On the other, I had a lot of work to do! For this reason, years later, the Common Core struck me as a happy median. Here was a document explicitly outlining what I was to teach and yet it still granted me the freedom to chart my own approach to each of the standards. I was all in. And if I was all in, so too were my students. I was not going to leave them in the dark the way I had been. I decided to *give* my 6th grade students the Common Core.

In searching for resources to assist me in introducing my students to the Common Core, I was disappointed; there was virtually nothing out there. So much work had been done to market and sell the Common Core to government officials and educators, and yet nothing had been done to help *students* step into this new framework. (Is this to be one more thing we do *to* our students, rather than *with* our students?) I did find a short video on the Common Core catering to *adults* without an educational background. It was a start.

On the day I selected to introduce my students to the Common Core, I began with a picture of myself taken when I was in 2nd grade. I explained to my students that which I described in the opening paragraphs of this article. "How many of you can relate to my feelings? How many of you have felt frustrated because you've learned something and then forgotten it so quickly?"

And then I promised them that I wouldn't try to trick them, that we'd have fun, but that we'd discuss what we were trying to accomplish and why. I played for them the short video I'd found online and took them to the Common Core home page. I allowed them to navigate. Some wanted to see what kindergarteners were being asked to do. My students were surprised by the standards assigned to students so young, or at least the way in which these

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standards were worded. Some wanted to see what the standards were like at the other end of the spectrum. They were baffled by those skills set aside for juniors and seniors in high school. For most, it was like being shown a document in a new language. But they took solace in the fact that we would work through the Common Core together. They also celebrated upon hearing that not many students in the district, or even in the state, would be getting firsthand exposure to this document the way they would.

I selected the first standard to tackle with my class and projected it on the whiteboard at the front of the room a few days later. Before clicking to the appropriate slide, I prefaced this first attempt carefully. I explained to my students that their initial reaction was going to be one of confusion and possibly dismay. I assured them, however, that we would work through it together and that by the end of class they'd be laughing at just how accessible the standard really is.

I was not disappointed. As soon as I cued up the next slide, I was met with deep sighs and blank faces. I read the standard aloud twice:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3—Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

I asked my class to spend three or four minutes writing whatever came to mind pertaining to the standard. "You could pick out words or phrases from the standard that you don't understand. You could generate a list of keywords. You could simply copy the standard word for word from the board. You could even write, 'I don't get it' or 'Mr. Little must be crazy!' What you *cannot* do is leave the page blank." Most got on with the task grudgingly; a few just sat there, pencils down. Surprisingly, it wasn't the students who typically refuse to participate who sat by in complete paralysis; it was my *strongest* students. Those students accustomed to success at the hands of teachers who would spoon-feed them were fearful to set out on their own.

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I circulated around the room, often having to remove an arm or a hand from words that had been scribbled down and quickly concealed. Wherever I found words on a page, regardless of what those words said, I praised: “That’s a good start.” The point, of course, was to lessen the anxiety and get my students to embrace the process. Those students who were clearly more comfortable and finding greater success I nudged in one direction or another, giving them advice on how they might move forward. When I stumbled across a new approach for deciphering the standard that I, myself, hadn’t thought of, I made a short announcement to the class. “Some of your classmates have gone ahead and decided to *do* what the standard is asking of them. They’ve come up with an example of an appropriate response. That’s pretty cool. You should feel comfortable doing the same if you think you’re up for the challenge.”

After what must have felt like hours for some of the boys and girls in my classroom, I arranged them in small groups and asked them to share their thoughts with a few of their classmates. “Feel free to read what it is you have written. If you’d rather paraphrase, that’s fine too. I want you to work together, though, to make sense of this standard.” Once again I began my rounds, listening in on bits and pieces of conversation. To my pleasant surprise, conversations ran deeper and took longer than I had anticipated. In circulating, I was able to poke and prod small groups of students in new directions that would get them closer to self-discovery. Not all, but many, were invested. Those who weren’t needed a little redirection. I encouraged groups composed of weaker readers to simply compile a list of questions they might ask after we reassembled the class. I was a little more forceful with the uninvested *strong* readers. “*You* are the teacher at the moment, and your responsibility is to teach each other what those words on the whiteboard mean. Unless every member of this group has complete confidence in their ability to break down that standard for the rest of the class, your conversation is not over yet.”

By the time we reassembled the class, there were varying degrees of comprehension and comfort in regard to the standard, but *everyone* was farther along than they had been upon the unveiling. I decided to start our conversation as a class by modeling

the approach I would have taken. I asked my students to help me break down the standard into smaller units. “You wouldn’t try to complete your math homework and your social studies homework at the same time, would you? So why try to tackle more of this standard than you need to at one time?” I then had them identify six or seven keywords in the standard. From there, we went in whatever direction the class wanted to go. Having checked in with each individual student and then each group, I knew who had something important to bring to the table and at what point in the conversation to draw them in. And so we diagramed, paraphrased, and translated our way through the standard.

When all was said and done, I reread the standard and asked, “How difficult does that standard sound *now*? Who has actually done what this standard is asking of us *already*?” Many hands in the air. Many nods of assent. I won’t say all, but most of my students left the classroom that day with newfound confidence and a feeling of accomplishment.

That evening, in reflecting on my day, I realized that the Common Core standard I had projected on the board had inadvertently become my content, my vehicle. As I had intended, we used the standard to guide our future study. But we also used the standard to practice deciphering and decoding; isn’t the Common Core, after all, an informational text? Furthermore, we used the standard to expand our critical thinking skills and to flex our metacognitive muscles. There were certainly times throughout the day that I thought to myself, “Mayday! What have I gotten us into?” Had one of my colleagues walked in partway through class, I wouldn’t have held it against them for saying, “You see? It just can’t be done this way.” But a week of concerted effort proved otherwise.

On Friday, I asked my students to reflect on the work we had done over the course of the week. The assignment was relatively open-ended. I simply provided the standard again at the top of a sheet of paper and posed the question, “How did I meet this week’s Common Core standard?” I didn’t want to supply the class with so much guidance and structure that they simply regurgitated what I thought we had accomplished. On the other hand, I didn’t want this written reflection to seem ambiguous or arbitrary. It was a balancing act. Unfortunately, I knew from the moment I set the

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exercise down in front of my students that it was out of balance; I had erred on the side of too little direction. So before setting my students to task, I provided them with further oral instructions and suggestions. Ultimately, I was pleased with the result. What follows are sentences lifted from the paragraphs submitted by various students in my classes.

Admittedly, old habits die hard. A handful of students simply wrote what they thought I wanted to hear:

I think I met the common core standard pretty well this week.

When I first read this weeks CCS, I didn't fully understand what it ment [sic], but I am now confident that I do.

And there were certainly still holdouts among my students:

I had a little trouble thinking of text-to-self connections and don't know how that was supposed to help us.

I feel like the work didn't help me at all ... I feel like reading should be about reading books instead of describing books and learning about characters.

But the vast majority demonstrated a level of cognition and comprehension that surprised me:

When you relate to a character, it's more interesting if you go deeper. By go deeper, I mean put in details, emotion, think about what you're writing, make sure it makes sense, and make it personal.

I know what they mean by saying static, dynamic, antagonist, protagonist, flat, or round characters. I understood

and realized all of them are in all of my silent reading books. I will be able to use these when describing characters for books.

I feel like I know about most of these words but sometimes they can get tough for me so I want to try to learn them all and be good with them and know them fully.

I learned that if you just say "I have an older brother too" it's really boring and you need to tell something you did with them or why that happened to you.

At first it was kind of hard to understand what these words meant but I think it helped to go over them in class and then to do the homework sheet. I still am kind of confused about the difference between a flat character and a static character. I think I have a pretty good grasp on everything else.

I didn't really understand the standard at first. Then I understood it more when I related it to Star Wars!

With only one standard behind us and many more to go, the road is yet unpaved. But I'm confident that each step will be easier than our last. On Monday, when I roll out the next standard, my students will be that much more confident, my expectations that much more clear. We will use the strategies we so recently acquired to make lighter of our work. What's more, we will have agency, ownership, control. And when we find ourselves at the end of this road in June, we will look back with a real sense of accomplishment at that which we have achieved *together*. And, most importantly, no one will be left in the dark.

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