

Thinking Critically and Creatively about the Common Core

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These Standards are not intended to be new names for old ways of doing business. They are a call to take the next step.

—National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010b, p. 5

Many teachers and administrators across the state of New Hampshire and in the other parts of the country are facing the challenge of revising their curricula to meet the demands of the Common Core State Standards. A broader, related challenge involves the changing information landscape and the necessity of preparing students with 21st-century skills. These challenges would seem to hold great promise, but they can be daunting and difficult to puzzle our way through. We have come to understand the critical and creative thinking required by the Common Core State Standards more profoundly through our own teaching in our integrated first-year courses. We will describe how these courses work and relate them back to the Common Core and 21st-century skills in order to explore how our experience can help others to meet these challenges.

Composition and First Year Seminar are two courses required by our university's general education program. Typically, these courses are taught independently. First Year Seminar focuses on introducing students to "critical thinking skills and basic tools of gathering and evaluating information" (Plymouth State University Academic Catalog, 2011, p. 63). Composition centers on "the importance of reading and writing for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communication" (PSUAC, 2011, p. 224). Despite the similarities in these descriptions, Composition is generally thought of as a "writing course" and First Year Seminar is thought of as a "critical thinking course." We have taught these classes as linked courses for the past three years and have come to conceive of both courses as "critical thinking courses," with Composition focusing on thinking and writing and First Year Seminar focusing on reading and thinking.

Critical thinking is a key component of the Common Core. The portrait of a student who meets the Common Core Standards describes critical thinking skills, such as valuing evidence, comprehending as well as critiquing, demonstrating independence, and responding to the varying demands of audience, task purpose, and discipline. These are all skills required of students in our linked courses.

Every First Year Seminar explores a particular question chosen by the instructor. Our course question is, what is race and how does it matter? Our course design is not dependent upon any particular question; however, the question must be open, complex, multidimensional, and capable of being addressed in various ways, requiring more than a few texts to begin to answer it thoroughly. It is similar to an essential question in that it encourages depth of inquiry and cannot be answered definitively. This is very much in the spirit of the Common Core.

In this linked course, students must enroll in both courses, which meet for two consecutive blocks. As instructors, we each attend both courses and plan together. Throughout the semester, we often share readings, explore related themes, and use parallel assignments. While early in the semester the course sessions are taught separately, by the end of the semester the lines between the classes blur as students engage in an inquiry project in First Year Seminar that culminates in a paper written in Composition.

In these classes, content and our course question are used as vehicles for the practice of critical and creative thinking. Within this structure, students are able to, in the words of the Common Core, "gain both general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010a,

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p. 7). They learn about content through skills and about skills through content.

We organized the class around four "directions": self and society, past and present, scientific inquiry, and creative thought. These directions correspond to our university's general education program. They could be thought of as disciplinary ways of thinking or modes of inquiry, or "ways of considering and understanding human experience" (PSUAC, 2011, p. 64). These directions represent, in the words of the university catalog, "four different approaches to learning" (PSUAC, 2011, p. 64). These directions, while somewhat discipline based, are different from "interdisciplinary" units of study in that they do not focus on content or subject, but rather on modes of inquiry or "discipline-specific expertise." We use these directions in two ways: to structure the early part of the course and to help students to expand their thinking about their inquiry questions. The larger purpose in both cases is to help students expand their ability to analyze and compose ideas.

We begin with self and society. Students compose personal narratives about the life experiences they see as significant and subsequently analyze how social institutions affected their experience. At the same time, students in First Year Seminar read *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991) and consider how social institutions like neighborhoods affect identity and opportunity. Then students compose episodic papers using Cisneros's style of writing, linking the two courses and linking self to society.

Similarly, when considering how the past and present influence each other, students watch episodes of the documentary *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (Adelman, Herbes-Sommers, Strain, Smith, Cheng, 2003), dealing with construction of race over time, and read Ira Berlin's article "The Changing Definition of African-American" (2010). At the same time, they write an essay in which they describe and connect two events in their lives from

two distinct points in time, showing how these events influenced each other.

The Common Core Standards encourage us to widen our notions of text, to use nonfiction and fictional texts. We have expanded this definition of text to include not only nonfiction and fiction, but also non-print text, such as art, film, and popular culture, as well as students' own compositions from current and past classes. For example, when we ask students to consider creative thought, we bring in visual art to help them analyze these texts and to envision race and racialized experiences in new ways. Beyond expanding the types of text used in the class, using text is not only about what students read, but also about using text to come to new understandings. Thus, we are not teaching the texts themselves as content. We do not give reading quizzes or examinations on the content of the texts. Instead, we engage students in using the texts as the material and the medium through which to make sense of our course question. So this is less about gathering up a suitcase of information about race and more about learning to construct and understand a narrative or an argument.

Figure 1. A select list of texts we use in our linked courses

- Adelman, L., Herbes-Sommers, C., Strain, T. H., Smith, L. M., Cheng, J. (2003). *Race: The power of an illusion* [Television documentary]. San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel.
- Berlin, I. (2010, February). The changing definition of African-American: How the great influx of people from Africa and the Caribbean since 1965 is challenging what it means to be African-American. *Smithsonian magazine*, 40(11), 80–88.
- Cisneros, S. (1991). *The house on Mango Street*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Davis, K. (Producer and Director). (2005). *A girl like me* [Documentary]. United States. Retrieved online, October 7, 2012, from <http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/watch/6/>
- Diamond, C. (2011). From robes to blogs. In J. Kowner (Ed.), *Comp Journal* (pp. 15–23). Plymouth, NH: Plymouth State University English Department.
- Gould, S. J. (1981). Measuring heads: Paul Broca and the heyday of craniology. In S. J. Gould, *The mismeasure of man* (pp. 73–112). New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Kozol, J. (2005, September). Still separate, still unequal: America's educational apartheid. *Harper's Magazine*, 311(1864), 41–54.
- Martson, T. (2012). Race and videogames: A social concept in a video world. In R. Alosa (Ed.), *Comp Journal* (pp. 43–48). Plymouth, NH: Plymouth State University English Department.
- Morrison, T. (1994). *The bluest eye*. New York, NY: Plume Book.
- Wise, T. J. (2008). *White like me: Reflections on race from a privileged son*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press.

As teachers and administrators integrate fiction and nonfiction texts into the curriculum to meet the demands of the Common Core, questions about organization and context arise. How can we arrange these texts in meaningful ways? The risk is that we merely divide types of text among disciplines without considering how these texts might relate to each other and within what context they will be examined and used. Our design provides another model of how this integration might be accomplished. Students are reading and composing multiple kinds of texts that relate to each other and contribute to their understanding of a larger issue or question.

In the second half of the semester, the students pose and investigate a question related to the larger course question. Students have asked about connections between race and the women's suffrage movement, race and the video gaming industry, racial profiling in law enforcement, children's process of racial identification, and race in television families. Often these questions arise from students' interests or academic majors and are related to the central focus of the instructional unit.

This inquiry project begins in First Year Seminar, where students use the four directions to explore a topic and develop a question. They are required to use not only text sources, but also original research, which is related to Phelps's concept of the three-search paper (1992). They must use themselves as a source, exploring their personal relationship to the topic. They are also required to interview an expert on their topic with a perspective different from their own. They then use the four directions to explore aspects of their question and to gather related sources, including works of art and popular culture, fiction and nonfiction texts, and academic articles. They analyze each source in writing, organize their information, and reflect on their thinking throughout the process. At the same time, they are developing the structure of their inquiry paper in which they will develop a narrative argument, weaving together evidence from their sources, synthesizing and composing meaning.

These intellectual moves have helped us to understand the Common Core Standards differently and more deeply. Throughout this inquiry process, students move back and forth between composition and deconstruction, personal and sociocultural meaning, reading and writing, and composing and analyzing narratives. While these intellectual moves arise out of our class, they are not specific to these two courses or to any particular content. In fact, we have come to understand that these moves can relate directly to the intent of the Common Core, enabling us to expand our thinking through a variety of texts, those we read and those we compose. This process not only meets the demands

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of the Common Core, but allows us to use the Common Core to extend and enrich our notions of curriculum.

One of the ways that curriculum is expanded is through discipline-specific expertise. The directions themselves as representations of different disciplines constitute intellectual moves, or ways of thinking critically and creatively. We use them as lenses through which we can view any content, as well as expand our thinking. This demonstrates how critical and creative thinking crosses disciplinary boundaries and yet how each discipline offers unique approaches to making meaning. In this way it differs from conceiving of disciplines as “covering” certain topics or content, such as science dealing with the natural world or history dealing with wars. Instead, this approach allows us to apply scientific or historical modes of inquiry to any content. In our class, for example, students consider how science has been used to reify racial differences in the past, thus incorporating both scientific and historical thinking.

In order to help students become, in the words of the Common Core, “engaged and open-minded—but discerning—readers and listeners” (NGACBP and CCSSO, 2010a, p. 7), another intellectual move we employ is to teach students how to construct different kinds of meaning in their reading. We ask students to respond to their readings on four levels: literal, personal, and cultural and in terms of their own reading/writing and thinking. This allows students to distinguish between their own responses and reactions to a text and the text itself, while simultaneously pushing them to consider wider cultural meanings. They are also asked to reflect on the construction of ideas, their own as well as the author’s. Through a process of concentric circles of meaning, we apply similar analyses to students’ own writing, asking them to consider their own work as text.

A third intellectual move emerges in the research process. Students consider various sources and types of expertise: personal experience, scholarly expertise, and direct inquiry in the form of

the interview. Students must weave these sources together and create new knowledge. Thus, we guide students not only to, in the words of the Common Core, “constructively evaluate others’ use of evidence” (NGACBP and CCSSO, 2010a, p. 7) and to “use relevant evidence when supporting their own points in writing and speaking, making their reasoning clear to the reader or listener” (NGACBP and CCSSO, 2010a, p. 7), but also to extend beyond this to include personal and direct research. This process is distinct from current paradigms of research in that it is neither an account of a personal search nor a pure synthesis of authoritative expertise from outside sources. This process forces student research to move beyond simple reporting or compiling or even synthesizing of existing sources. This is the culmination of the critical and creative thinking process.

Through our experiences in this class, we have come to believe that the Common Core Standards hold great promise. At their best, they can open up new ways of thinking about curriculum and instruction. In order to exploit their potential for encouraging critical and creative thinking, educators must focus on larger questions and modes of inquiry, rather than merely content and type of text.

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