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Simplifying the ELA Common Core; Demystifying Curriculum

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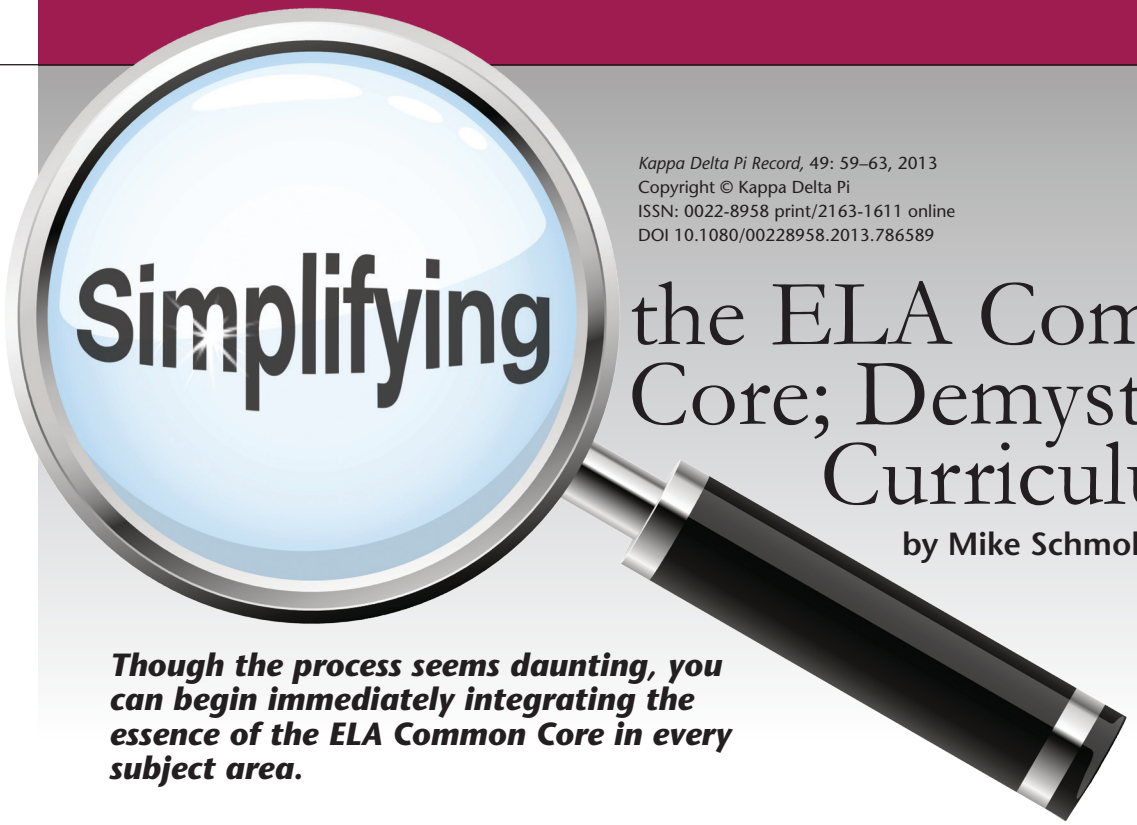

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the ELA Common Core; Demystifying Curriculum

by Mike Schmoker and Carol Jago

Though the process seems daunting, you can begin immediately integrating the essence of the ELA Common Core in every subject area.

The English Language Arts (ELA) Common Core State Standards ([CCSS], 2010) could have a transformational effect on American education. But this will occur only if (ironically) we recognize that the actual lists of standards themselves are the weakest portion of the Common Core documents. Done right, the ELA Common Core has the potential to right the ship of literacy, to facilitate, at long last, the creation of coherent curriculum in every course and to rescue us from the fads and pseudo-literacies of recent decades. This would thus eventuate in the greatest proportion of college and career-ready students in our history. The keys to its success are clarity and simplicity.

As many are beginning to recognize, the true strength of the (still-evolving) Common Core is found in the ancillary documents and appendices that accompany the standards. Imperfections notwithstanding, the general emphases contained in these documents describe authentic, traditional literacy far better than their state-level predecessors. Despite some occasional overreach, the appendices go a long way toward clarifying what students need most and have always needed: abundant opportunities to engage in close reading of large amounts of high quality, complex text, combined with opportunities to engage in discussion and writing grounded in text.

But alas, the actual standards—the grade-by-grade lists themselves—are not much help here. Not only are they poorly written and confusing; they actually divert us from the essence of authentic literacy (Schmoker & Graff, 2011). As Daniel Willingham and others have demonstrated, this is the primary problem with the ELA Common Core: the pretension that language arts can be subdivided into an exhaustive, atomized taxonomy of separate skills (Willingham, 2009), many of them indecipherable (Schmoker & Graff, 2011). The impulse to generate such lists is an unfortunate holdover from the first iteration of state standards, which manifestly failed us.

The better (if unofficial) news is this: the architects of the Common Core are now distancing themselves from the committee-generated

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pablum of the lists. To their credit, they are inviting us to focus, instead, on three simple "instructional shifts":

- **building knowledge** through **content-rich nonfiction** and **informational texts;**
- reading and writing grounded in **evidence from text;** and
- regular practice with **complex text** and its **academic vocabulary.**

Make no mistake: these basic shifts—implemented across the curriculum—represent a radical return to genuine literacy. If they are even reasonably well-implemented, they will change the face of education. Combined with the *judicious* use of the CCSS appendices and suggested texts, they will allow us to make rapid progress toward the goal of college and career preparation for all. Moreover, these shifts will demystify, and thus expedite, the completion of a project which could have more impact on the quality of American education than any other reform, bar none: the creation of coherent, content-rich curriculum in every course (*American Educator,* 2010–2011; Hirsch, 2009; Marzano, 2003). It would accomplish this, in part, by returning literacy—and texts themselves—from the periphery to the center of curriculum.

Here's how, starting with English Language Arts, we could implement the Common Core and create coherent, literacy-rich curriculum across the disciplines. Importantly: there are endless variations on the following. Please regard these *only* as attempts to clarify and to demonstrate how virtually any school or district can begin this work immediately.

Curriculum in English and Language Arts

Instead of attempting to create a curriculum that "covers" the bewildering array of discrete standards in the Common Core, start with a careful review and discussion of the three shifts previously listed. Then begin assembling a good balance of high-quality, adequately complex texts that can be reasonably taught within a 9-month, 36-week school year. These—not skills—are the soul of your curriculum. It would be helpful to consult the good lists of literature and nonfiction contained in Appendix B of the CCSS.

Let's assume, for instance, that we have about seven actual weeks to work with each grading period, given the various exigencies that emerge (e.g., testing, remediation, assemblies) and leaving some extra time for self-selected reading and teacher's discretion. That gives us about 35 days to work with each quarter.

We could start with books, plays, or novels—for example, one fictional work and one nonfiction book or biography each nine weeks. These would be carefully selected for their literary merit, complexity, and appeal. We might devote 10 to 15 days of class time to each book. That gives us adequate time for close reading, "embedded" vocabulary instruction (on words that come *directly from student reading*), plenty of discussion, informal writing, and perhaps one extended interpretive essay—or a short research paper (the best possible preparation, at some point, for an *oral presentation*—which the Common Core rightly emphasizes).

There is time for all these things. That's because, per the Common Core, we are no longer devoting time to pseudo-literate activities like making book jackets, watching movies, or completing skills-based worksheets.

That leaves us about two or more weeks for other readings each grading period: time to study, discuss, and write about multiple speeches, articles, poems, or short fiction. For shorter works, there would be even more emphasis on close reading (which is neither possible nor desirable with every page of a full-length book (Gallagher, 2009, pp. 72–74).

Now let's add another element—the straw that stirs the drink: good questions and prompts that are the basis for purposeful reading, discussion, and writing, grounded in the texts, that is, entire books, chapters, or shorter works. These

should be generated deliberately, over time, by teacher teams, whose collective insights will result in the most appealing, high-quality discussions and writing assignments.

For instance, in many novels, a simple question that can engage students throughout their reading is:

What evidence do you find that the main character grows or matures from chapter to chapter—or by the end of the book?

Or if students are reading Walt Whitman's *Oh Captain, My Captain* (a grade 6–8 Common Core exemplar text), we might ask them:

Which words and phrases in the poem best express Whitman's admiration for Lincoln?

When students read *nonfiction* articles on provocative topics, we can encourage—and model—close reading on the basis of questions like this:

In this article on the pros and cons of nuclear energy, which evidence in the text best supports the side you will take in your argument?

Finally, the team needs to commit to a common minimum number and length of formal and research papers for the year and quarter. Why? As David Conley (2005) exhorted, this is the only way to ensure that all students—not just the lucky ones who get the best teachers—will be prepared for the kinds of writing they will do in college or for various careers. These formal papers (we recommend about two formal/research papers per grading period, in every grade) should be written about one or more of the works read that quarter. And if we're smart, we'll realize that in English, *papers themselves*—not multiple choice or objective tests—should be our primary, near-exclusive form of assessment. This approach further simplifies the English teacher's work. These papers should be scored with a common scoring guide, using, if we wish, selected parts of the Common Core writing criteria. Figure 1 shows how all of this might look for the first quarter of 6th grade.

Figure 1. Grade 6 English Language Arts.

FIRST QUARTER (a total of about 35 days of instruction)

For all readings: embedded vocabulary instruction, taught before and during the reading

(10–15 days) Novel: *Tom Sawyer* (Twain)

Daily discussions/short or longer* writing assignments

(10–15 days) Nonfiction book: *Jim Thorpe: Original All-American* (Bruchac)

Daily discussions/short or longer** writing assignments

(3 days) 2 News/Magazine articles (pro-con):

"Children and Video Games: Playing with Violence" (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2011)

"Video Games Don't Cause Children to Be Violent" (M. D. Gallagher, 2010)

(3 days) 1–2 speeches, e.g.:

"Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat" (Churchill)

(4 days) Several poems: author studies; informal interpretive writings; oral interpretation, e.g.:

"The Road Not Taken" (Frost)

"If" (Kipling)

RUBRIC FOCUS for the Quarter: "Write arguments to support claims and interpretations with clear reasons and relevant evidence"; "organize reasons and evidence logically" (from Common Core writing criteria).

FORMAL PAPERS (the perfect preparation for effective oral presentations):

*3–5 page literary analysis on any text(s) read this quarter

**3–5 page argumentative/research paper on any nonfiction text(s) read this quarter

It's that simple. Every year, every grading period, could consist of variations on this format. David Liben, who worked closely with the architects of the ELA Common Core, is convinced that such curriculum, built around something like the "three instructional shifts," would afford our students with world-class English—and content-area—instruction (personal communication, September, 2012).

Let's look at how we could incorporate these new (but actually very traditional) emphases as we build equally simple, high-quality curriculum in the content areas.

Curriculum in the Content Areas

Curriculum in the content areas would be surprisingly similar and equally straightforward. There would be the same emphasis on inquiry-

Figure 2. Curriculum Example.

First Quarter: Revolution	Topics Covered	Chapters and Pages	Unit Question(s) for close reading, discussion, and writing	Primary Sources and Supplementary Texts	Primary Source Questions for close reading, discussion, and writing
WEEK 1: Building Colonial Unity	Taxation without representation Thomas Paine French and Indian War Sons/ Daughters of Liberty	Chapter 5: pp. 148–151 pp. 156–158 pp.165–169 p. 172	Were the colonists justified in seeking independence?	Nonfiction book: *Washington at Valley Forge* or *Lafayette and the American Revolution,* both by Russell Freedman Proclamation of 1763 (p. 124)	Did individuals or events dictate the major historical outcomes and developments during the Revolutionary War (or history in general)? Was the Proclamation of 1763 fair or unfair to the colonists?
WEEK 2: Moving Toward Independence	Boston Massacre, Tea Party, etc. Declaration of Independence	Chapter 5: pp. 178–184 (ignore all sidebars) pp. 185–187	Were the colonists justified in seeking independence?	Declaration of Independence *The New York Times* article on Arab Spring, p. 146	Critique the Declaration from the *British* perspective. Compare and contrast the U.S. Independence movement and the Arab Spring.

driven analysis, discussion, and writing, all grounded in close reading of carefully selected, content-rich texts. And students would primarily learn the vocabulary that is "embedded" within these texts. For each course, teams would establish minimum guidelines for the number and length of formal research papers to be completed each semester—for example, one, three-to-five page research paper each semester.

But unlike English, the texts would be selected largely on the basis of their connection to the essential content standards for each course. These topics—whether in social studies, science, or math—must be carefully selected; our state standards documents often contain more standards than can be reasonably taught within the school year. If we want students to succeed, we have to be willing to reduce the number of content standards, and the bevy of so-called thinking skills. We have to ignore the less essential standards (Marzano, 2003). This is especially paramount when we recognize that literacy must now become a much larger component of core curriculum; far more time must be allotted for students to learn essential content through frequent opportunities for purposeful reading, discussion, and writing.

This is not a new notion of curriculum. But it is new for many of us, whose training inadvertently resulted in students receiving a literacy-poor curricular diet of often questionable activities, basal and worksheet assignments, movies, and group projects, which do little to prepare students for jobs or college.

Once we know that we have arrived at what Marzano referred to as a "viable" number of standards, we can then take the next critical step that is missing in so many curricula: we can apportion the standards in a logical sequence, by grading period—allowing, again, some amount of time for teacher's discretion each grading period.

Over time, teams will want to collaboratively develop and refine the inestimably important questions and prompts for those readings. Well-designed questions will promote close reading and ensure interesting, successful discussions and writing assignments, grounded in careful analysis of text. Because these are so critical, it would be wise to have a system in place for sharing the most successful questions, as well as compelling texts, with other schools in the district or region.

Figure 2 shows how a couple of weeks of curriculum might look in one content area, Social Studies. Note how textbook pages—not *whole chapters*—are carefully matched to topics.

Science curriculum would be similar. It also would contain a schedule of units or topics and science-related readings and questions,

with frequent opportunities for discussion and writing—all of it grounded in close, careful reading of texts, diagrams, charts, and data displays (which are integral to science texts and understanding). This is precisely the kind of literacy-based science education now being advocated by science and literacy experts (see Alberts, 2006/2007; Gomez & Gomez, 2007; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Zmach, Hapgood, & Palincsar in Schmoker, 2011, pp. 168–171). Science curriculum, however, might include an additional column for labs and experiments, carefully matched to the units and topics to promote deeper understanding.

Math curriculum—similarly—would have columns for topics, textbook pages, or other readings (to be used by teachers and to be read by students themselves), as well as questions or prompts that would be used as the basis for close reading, discussion, and writing about math. As Lynn Steen (2007) pointed out, students gain immeasurably from regular opportunities to read, talk, and write as they routinely develop "quantitative arguments" in their math classes.

Art, music, and other performance-oriented electives would include required readings (albeit fewer of them) with discussion and writing. These texts could focus on artists, musicians, artistic and musical epochs—or critiques of art and music.

Closing Thoughts

Realize that many schools embraced the "three shifts" (or their equivalents) decades, even centuries, ago in every discipline—long before they were formulated by the Common Core. Tempe Preparatory Academy in Arizona adopted them in the 1990s on a remarkably simple model. In the school's two-hour English/Social Studies block, students closely read, underline, and then discuss common, complex literary and historical texts, which are the substance of curriculum. Teachers ensure that students' interpretations, comments, and arguments are all grounded in the texts. The last week of every month, students write an essay about one or more of the readings. A similar approach is used throughout the curriculum, and it is a marvel to watch. For what it's worth, Tempe Prep was the first school in the state where 100% of its students passed every portion of the high school exit exam.

More could be written here, but this is where we should start. Will we ever learn that too much complexity and detail only confuses, complicates, and delays implementation (Buckingham, 2005)? For now, let's move forward confidently to create clear, content-rich curriculum that abounds in the most enduring forms of literacy. In this way, our efforts will put us on course to educate students more knowledgeable and literate than any previous generation, regardless of where they attend school.

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