

## **Shanahan on Literacy**

### **Power Standards or Why the Common Core is Like a Second Marriage**

Recently, I received a note from an educator trying to develop “power standards” for the common core. Power standards is a concept developed by Doug Reeves and Larry Ainsworth. Their idea was that school districts needed to identify the most important curriculum standards – the ones students really needed to learn—and then to prioritize those standards to ensure maximum learning.

Most state standards have been long lists of semi-random, undifferentiated skills, usually quite uneven in grain-size. So this approach made sense.

The common core standards, however, are relatively brief (“fewer, bigger, better”) and one standard is really no more important than another. As such these standards work better in their totality, than as individual items. The common core standards are the power standards.

### **Coping with Common Core**

What is going on here is something marriage counselors see all the time. A husband or wife in a second marriage often tries to refight the battles of the first marriage. Bad idea. The circumstances have changed. The status quo is no more. The new hubby isn’t responsible for what the Ex did or failed to do. It is time to move on with a fresh slate.

We’re all in a second marriage with standards.

This new partner deserves a tabula rasa. The coping behaviors that made sense the first time around no longer make sense. (If you stopped inviting your sister to your parties, because your former husband got drunk in social situations, it may be time to update your invite list). The point isn’t that these coping behaviors didn’t have utility before -- they did, that was why you developed them -- but your situation has changed and those responses, as wise as they might have been, no longer should have a place in your life’s routine.

### **Which Coping Mechanisms to Drop**

What does that mean in terms of the standards? Probably many things, but here are a few that I have run into:

1. Don’t provide grade level standards for each teacher, but give them the entire set of standards K-12. These standards have coherence, and teachers cannot understand them a grade level at a time.
2. Don’t develop pacing guides for the reading, writing, or oral language standards. Pacing guides made sense when standards were a bunch of individual skills, but these fit together better into coherent sets that need to be applied in combination during reading (or writing or speaking or listening).
3. Don’t divide the reading, writing, or oral language standards by report card marking. See item 2 above.

4. Don't disconnect the reading standards from texts. You won't improve kids' chances of success in identifying the key ideas by having students read lots of disconnected paragraphs to answer "key ideas questions." Instead, students need to apply such skills or engage in such behaviors, with text that is sufficiently complex and challenging.
5. Don't reduce common core standards to power standards. Consider doing the opposite. A great inservice would be for teachers to unpack standards to identify the subskills and knowledge inherent in each. Understanding each standard in this way allows teachers to be more responsive to students' learning needs.
6. Don't have teachers staple their standards into their lesson plan books. Instead, have them staple them into their brains. These grade level standards are brief and well organized enough that teachers can carry these around in their heads instead of in their book bags--meaning that they can take advantage of teachable moments that may arise.

Each of these coping mechanisms made sense before, but they don't fit our new partner and ought to be dropped from our repertoires.

Oh, and don't go to sleep angry.