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Understanding the central themes of the Common Core Standards and the need to develop digital literacy and 21st century skills in today's classrooms

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Executive Summary

Today's students need to do more than just learn the concepts and skills introduced in daily instruction in order to be successful. They need to know how to use technology to acquire knowledge, analyze and evaluate information, explore, draw conclusions and test theories. More importantly, they need to know how to apply what they learned to real-life scenarios. Students need to learn how to think critically and creatively, navigate an increasingly digital world safely, and conduct meaningful research that will lead to understanding through discovery.

The goal of the Common Core State Standards is, in part, to promote these same skills throughout content area instruction. The standards are designed to facilitate student acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary for future success in college and career opportunities. Embedded in the standards are the goals of teaching students how to think critically, learn by doing, and develop the 21st century skills essential to future success.

The next generation of assessments like PARCC and Smarter Balanced are designed to assess the Common Core Standards and help prepare students to graduate high school being college and career ready. Succeeding on these assessments will require students to have the ability to apply digital literacy skills to demonstrate content understanding.

By strengthening students' 21st century skills and providing opportunities for meaningful, real-world application of technology, teachers are also enabling students to develop the skills they need to successfully master the Common Core State Standards and prepare for next generation assessments.

How it all began

The highly collaborative Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort that, to date, 46 states and the District of Columbia have voluntarily joined. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers coordinated the collaborative work of teachers, school administrators, educational experts and government officials in the formation of the standards. Three interconnected principles guided the creation of the Common Core State Standards. All students should: 1) learn a common curriculum; 2) partake in analogous assessments to measure learning; and 3) have assessment results analyzed on a common scale (Loveless, 2012). Moreover, growing dissatisfaction with the current education system's focus on content coverage over skill attainment, disconnect between the amount of standards and adequate time to thoroughly teach concepts and skills, and misalignment between the standards and college and career requirements, served as catalysts for what is fast becoming the most powerful and uniting education reform movement in this nation's history.

The dysfunctional system of state standards

The United States' state-run approach to education essentially created "50 countries of education" (Jacobs, 2012). Prior to the Common Core movement, each state's system of education followed their own set of standards, which meant requirements for each grade level varied state-to-state. Additionally, each state administered its own assessments with self-determined cut-off scores, which meant comparing student performance data among states was cumbersome and confusing. States have increasingly lost credibility to assess student performance since assessments are so poorly aligned between states and cut-off scores fluctuate to appease No Child Left Behind mandate requirements (Adkins, Kingsbury, Cronin, & Dahlin, 2007). With the Common Core Standards and subsequent common national assessments, the United States will finally be able to accurately analyze the performance of 4th graders in Portland, Maine, with 4th graders in Portland, Oregon. For the first time, all students will be held to the same high expectations regardless of where they live. For the first time in this nation's history, educators, parents, and policy makers will have a set of synchronized standards and common assessments that allow everyone to dialogue as a country about what works in classrooms coast to coast. Yes, the Common Core Standards are one, albeit only one, essential element of a robust and high achieving education system.

Common sense in the Common Core

The Common Core Standards were thoughtfully crafted using standards from high-achieving states and countries, expertise from educational leaders, and decades of national and international research about what works and doesn't work in education (Core Standards, 2010). Interestingly, the standards were designed backwards. The skill sets students are expected to have when they graduate from high school, called anchor standards in literacy, and standards of practice in math, were written first, then the 12th grade version of the standard, then the 11th grade version and so on, all the way down to kindergarten (Core Standards, 2010). Some states, such as Massachusetts, have chosen to design

prekindergarten standards as well (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy, 2011). The developmental progression of the skill sets in the standards makes rigor attainable and achievement doable for every student in every classroom, since teachers can identify where on the spectrum of development students currently are and progressively teach the subsequent skills to bring them up to grade level or above!

How will the Common Core change what is happening in schools?

Successful and thorough implementation of the Core Standards requires several significant changes within classrooms and school cultures. As schools roll out and integrate the Core Standards, it is vital that they remain mindful of these central and noteworthy themes.

1. More coherent, rigorous focus on a reduced number of standards

The consortium that created the Common Core believed in the mantra, "Teach less; teach it better." Compared to most sets of state standards, the Common Core consists of a smaller number of standards that are specific in focus and are meant to be cultivated in tandem and sequence in real-world applications. The high expectations the standards regard as on-grade-level work requires that teachers develop purposeful units of study that integrate multiple standards throughout the year. Unlike many states' standards, the Common Core is not a checklist in which specific standards are scheduled to be the focus for specific months of the year. No, the Common Core is most aptly thought of as sets of interrelated skills that must be spirally cultivated throughout each school year.

2. Literacy across the disciplines, Pre-K–12

Literacy skills are essential for comprehension and critical thinking not just in English language arts, but also in science, history, math, art, physical education, and all other areas of study. Primary and secondary sources, both in digital and print forms, which include textbooks, articles, and blogs, are to be read for acquisition of new knowledge, for comprehension of the topic, and as sources of information to substantiate claims. Thus, every teacher must present units of study and questions of inquiry that require the use of resources to discover key concepts.

3. (Im)Balance between literature and informational texts

The text of college and careers is primarily complex informational texts, not narrative stories. Accordingly, the balance between literature and informational texts will now be 50/50 in elementary and 30/70 in secondary. In most elementary classrooms presently, informational text represents just 20% of what students read (Moss & Newton, 2002). This shift signifies the robust return of science and history/social studies into elementary classrooms.

4. Evidence-based oral and written responses

An enormous amount of assessment questions hover around text, but don't require textual support for the answer — that is changing! Questions and prompts are being designed which require close reading and textual support in order to be accurately and fully answered. Teachers must ask students, "Where's the proof?" and "Which details are most relevant to substantiate your claim?" during discussions and written responses.

Successful implementation

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5. Text complexity: Reading on and above grade level

The standards realign the curve to bring in complexity from kindergarten through 12th grade. What most students are reading right now is systematically lower than what college and careers require. Also, the sobering fact that students reading below grade level continue to slip further and further behind if strategies are not utilized to expose them to on grade level and above grade level texts requires that all students must be exposed to texts both complex quantitatively: length, sentence structure, and qualitatively: content, vocabulary. Leveled readers can be used to provide intensive additional support; however, additional time to further review the on grade level text, rather than switching to leveled readers, aligns with Common Core's recommendations. The core of instruction for all students must be with on grade level, complex texts.

6. The power of academic vocabulary

Sophisticated word choice pervades complexity of text. As Jim Burke explains, "You cannot expect to succeed on assignments if you do not understand the directions" (2009). Along with spending time on content-specific vocabulary terms, such as mitochondria, and onomatopoeia, teachers must devote time to the academic terms that are critical for understanding but are not bolded within text, words such as, analyze, interpret, evaluate. These are the words that create barriers for so many students with regard to comprehension. In essence, every assessment is a reading comprehension test, since careful reading of directions directly impacts students' level of performance. Hess's work, which combines Webb's Depths of Knowledge with the revised Bloom's Taxonomy is a critical resource for teachers to utilize as they design units and activities that incorporate powerful directive vocabulary (2009). In fact, the majority of the questions, prompts, and tasks on next generation assessments align to the higher levels on the matrix.

7. Write from resources, even on assessments!

While narrative has an important place in every student's writing wheelhouse, there must be a stronger focus on expository writing, both informational and argumentative. As part of the Common Core's literacy standards, writing will be dependent on the text, which means writing assessments are also reading comprehension assessments. Students must pull directly from resources in their writing. Now 12 years into the 21st century, it's about time technological resources are embraced! Indeed, 21st century skills should be called "now skills" (Jacobs, 2012), as these are skills students in all grade levels need now, today. Central to the Core, students will be able to utilize available technology, software, and equipment to research, refine, and rework their writings. It is also possible that on assessments if they feel they need to find additional information, students will be able to search online for supplemental resources. Thus, it is imperative educators teach students how to effectively utilize technology, from typing to evaluating the accuracy of web content.

8. Think aloud, talk, collaborate, discuss: Learning is noisy

With regard to child development, do children learn to read, talk, or write first? If you said talk, you are correct. What comes next in the sequence, read or write? If you chose read, you have skipped a critical developmental step. After talking, children become writers. Ask any three year-old if they can write and they will show you their novellas of colorful lines and swirls. The developmental progression most children follow is speak, write, read. What does this mean for teachers? Providing students time to think aloud and to talk collaboratively with peers, is essential for discovering key concepts and refining ideas for students of

Utilizing technology

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all ages. In addition to discovery inquiry, students are now expected to develop polished speaking skills and active listening skills. Some released sample assessment items require students to present their writings through digital methods including recording a podcast or web-based video (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2012, and Partnership for Assessment of College and Career Readiness, 2012).

Digital literacy and the Core

From explicit technology requirements in Common Core Standards to sets of skills being necessary for completion of standards-based tasks and assessment questions, digital literacy skills are at the core of the Core. As reported in the most recent NAEP results, "[Technology] is becoming more the norm than the exception in our nation's schools and certainly the way [to] communicate in college and the workplace" (Fleming, 2012).

Schools and teachers must be mindful of the three components of digital literacy, "reading digital text, writing digital text, and developing the technical skills necessary to consume and produce these texts" (Wood, 2012). Reading digital text refers to scanning the text on a site to preview headings, images, phrases and sentences to evaluate relevancy; managing the toggle bars to scroll down to read the entire piece, not just what they can see on the screen; highlighting and copying phrases and sentences to be incorporated into writing — with correct citation of course! Writing digital text involves utilizing word processing applications and software to effectively organize, write, and edit pieces of writing. Along with typing, writing digital text includes formatting, using spelling and grammar checks, and searching for stronger synonyms with in-program thesauruses. Lastly, technical skills involve effective search skills (e.g. how can a new phrase or reorganization of keywords impact search results?), the ability to evaluate the legitimacy of the information and source, and the aptitude to problem solve in an effort to find the most relevant, precise, and accurate information. As Ohler asserts, "being literate also means being able to integrate … media forms into a single narrative or 'media collage,' such as a web page, blog, or digital story. That is, students need to be able to use new media collectively as well as individually" (2009).

Just how critical are digital literacy skills for students? Beginning in spring of 2015, the Common Core assessments will primarily be tablet- or computer-based. Incorporation of digital tools has its own standard, number six in the Common Core Writing Standards, to iterate the importance of digital tools in the researching, creating, and refining stages of writing. All written responses for next generation assessments will be typed. Starting in 4th grade, the Core Writing Standards require students be able to type two pages of text in one sitting with the number of pages students are to type in one sitting increasing with each subsequent grade level. Some, if not all sources of information (e.g. videos, podcasts, web pages, blogs, charts, presentations, Prezis, photos, etc.) for assessment tasks, will be web based. Students will be able to refer back to and review resources throughout the assessments. In some instances, students will be able to conduct additional research and incorporate additional resources into their writing during the assessment times. Said simply, digital literacy skills will be a determining factor in students' performance on the next generation of assessments.

Now the work begins

The development and adoption of the standards was not the hard part. No, the difficult task of thorough implementation is just beginning. The standards alone do not guarantee success. In fact, most criticism around the standards addresses the minimal impact they will potentially have on what happens within classrooms. "Common state standards only target the differences between states, not within them, sharply limiting common state standards' potential impact on achievement differences" (Loveless, 2012, p. 4). Indeed, while the focus on the standards is to provide a set of core, national benchmarks for students in K–12, it is up to individual states, school districts, and ultimately teachers to ensure that now, more than ever, students are being taught how to think critically, creatively, and flexibly.

The Common Core Standards and next generation assessments are preparing students for the 21st century knowledge economy. As the Standards explain, "To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas; to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems; and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and non-print texts in media forms old and new. The need to conduct research and to produce and consume media is embedded into every aspect of today's curriculum. In like fashion, research and media skills and understandings are embedded throughout the Standards, rather than treated in a separate section" (Core Standards, 2010). The major shifts embedded in the Core Standards are requiring educators to "reconsider both methodology and content" (Prensky, 2001, p. 3). Indeed, the next generation assessments will utilize integrated digital literacy skills, and "being able to read and write multiple forms of media and integrate them into a meaningful whole is the new hallmark of literacy" (Ohler, 2009).

Creating meaningful, relevant, and rigorous learning opportunities that utilize digital literacy skills and tools is the ultimate goal of the Core Standards. Students deserve it. Our world demands it. Without a doubt, now, more than ever, the main focus of education is to teach students how to think.

Determining factor

Said simply, digital literacy skills will be a determining factor in students' performance on the next generation of assessments.

About Amber Parks

Amber is a life-long learner and educator committed to transforming the caliber of education within schools by improving and refining curriculum, instruction, and school culture. She taught Pre-K–5 grade students in Spain and South Africa, Mississippi and Oklahoma, before launching The Learning Project in 2008 (www.thelearningproject.info). Amber has since worked with Pre-K–12 grade teachers and students in nearly 40 schools, focusing on improving the quality of instruction and increasing assessment scores through implementing a common visual language for learning and elevating expectations for student performance. Believing writing is a true litmus test for students' skills, she has designed an approach to teaching the structure of writing that utilizes Mind Designs and diagnostic rubrics to allow teachers to meet students where they are and strategically improve their writing skills. All of her work focuses on high quality and thorough implementation of the Common Core Standards.

Amber blogs at www.thelearningproject.info/notebook and tweets at @thelearningproj.

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