

The Common Core Ate My Baby and Other Urban Legends

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A noted literacy expert dismantles five myths about the new standards and shows what the standards really entail.

Urban legends are plausible stories—told as truths—that revolve around the complexities and challenges of modern life. Such legends are usually told as though they happened to someone the teller knows (a friend of a friend), such as the story about the friend's grandmother who dried her poodle in the microwave. (If these tales are meant to be cautionary tales, I've never been sure whether that one was supposed to warn us of the dangers of technology or of grandmothers.) Sociologists haven't managed to pin down exactly how and why these stories get started, but they're clearly spread by word of mouth and there's usually a grain of truth in them (and sometimes, as it turns out in the case of "the dingo ate my baby" story, more than a grain of truth).

It's not surprising, then, that the recent adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by 46 states and the District of Columbia has given rise to anxieties among educators that have fueled the flames of misperception, confusion, and rumor. I explore some of those legends here in the hope of slowing their spread.

So far, no educators have claimed that the new standards have eaten their baby, but if someone claims that the new CCSS *assessments* have eaten someone's 3rd grader, that story just might catch on.

Legend 1: The new standards prohibit teachers from setting purposes for reading or discussing prior knowledge.

I remember an old TV commercial for a brokerage firm that no longer exists. The ad shows a noisy, crowded restaurant where everyone is talking. The camera pans in on a table, and there someone says, "My broker is E. F. Hutton, and E. F. Hutton says ... ," at which point the noise comes to a screeching halt, and everyone leans in to hear what the speaker says. Tagline: "When E. F. Hutton talks, people listen."

In a similar vein, ever since adoption of the new standards began, curious educators have been asking how to implement them. In response, in June 2011, David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, lead authors of the English language arts and literacy standards, offered criteria that publishers could use to develop standards-appropriate textbooks. Although their advice was ostensibly aimed at the publishing industry, some states (such as Tennessee and Louisiana), as well as some school districts, quickly glommed on to these documents as mandates for instruction and textbook selection. Obviously, on the topic of the Common Core State Standards, when David Coleman and Susan Pimentel talk, people listen.

The Criteria—Revised

Although there was a lot of shaky information in the publisher's criteria documents, the most immediate turmoil raged around claims that it was inappropriate to discuss student background knowledge, have students make predictions about what they would read, or provide purposes to prepare students to read a given text.

This advice was bolstered by a series of videotapes in which Coleman demonstrated how to teach a reading lesson using the Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (Coleman, 2011). In these videos, Coleman ostentatiously notes that the best instructional approach is an affront to current practice—that instead of explaining the context in which these texts were written or having students make predictions about them, teachers should simply have the students read the texts.

Coleman and Pimentel viewed the increasingly divisive, frustrated, and angry responses from teachers and researchers with dismay, and they quickly retreated. In April 2012, they issued a startling revision of the publisher's criteria in English language arts and literacy for grades 3–12 that stripped away, among other things, the admonitions against prereading (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012; Gewertz, 2012).

But the damage was done. Despite the revision, many states, schools, and educators had already bought into the first version's claims. Even now, many educators probably don't know that the criteria have been revised. Unfortunately, the authors included no mea culpa in the 2012 revision that explained their reversal. And so, especially in states that adopted these criteria as policy, teachers are asking me why they can no longer discuss or build on students' background knowledge as a preparation for reading.

Prereading and Rereading

So to clarify, there simply is no ban on prereading in the Common Core State Standards. However, that doesn't mean that the shape and scope of reading lessons haven't greatly changed. They have.

In the past, the usual practice was to read a text thoroughly a single time in a guided or directed reading lesson. However, the new standards require something different—that students read more challenging texts and engage in "close reading" lessons, in which *rereading* is a hallmark. Although it may have made sense to thoroughly prepare students to get everything they could from a text they were going to read a single time, that kind of preparation isn't as necessary if students will be going back to the text two or three times. Letting kids give the text a try without overpreparing them is not unreasonable if you can add needed information back into the equation between a first and second read.

The benefit of the prereading controversy is that it's getting educators to take a hard look at how best to send students into a book—and this rethinking can help us clean up our prereading act. I've viewed many lessons in which the preparation to read a story is far more extended than the story itself. Too often, teachers assume that their students lack appropriate background knowledge to make sense of a text; and too often, their notion of how to address such gaps has been to tell students what the text is going to say rather than offer information that might help students interpret the author's message on their own.

Preparing students to read a text is perfectly reasonable, and it's compatible with the Common Core State Standards. But such preparation should be brief and should focus on providing students with the tools they need to make sense of the text on their own. Some texts may require providing students with a context to minimize interpretive problems; with other texts, it might make more sense to *not* provide background but to carefully observe as students confront the information, querying them about the potentially confusing stuff and adding any necessary explanation before a second reading.

Legend 2: Teachers are no longer required to teach phonological awareness, phonics, or fluency.

The 1990s were riven by the Reading Wars, those bitter arguments over how to teach beginning reading (see Stanovich, 2000; Taylor, 1998). Arguments raged about which approach was best—the popular whole-language approach or one that emphasized phonics and other basic skills. Convinced that the phonics approach was superior, many states began changing their policies during the 1990s to ensure that teachers taught basic skills explicitly.

The issue was eventually settled by a major review of research, the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), which became the basis of U.S. education policy. Subsequently, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became the law of the land, which included support for programs like Reading First and Early Reading First that emphasized phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency.

No Break with NCLB

When the new standards first came out, educators from around the United States started telling me that their states viewed them as a sharp break from the NCLB approach to reading instruction. This surprised me because the creators of the Common Core standards had assured me early on that the standards would be consistent with the research and that they didn't intend to reinvigorate the Reading Wars.

Anyone who takes a thorough look at the Common Core State Standards will find a section called Reading: Foundational Skills, which provides a clear and substantial description of phonological awareness (K–1), phonics (K–3), and fluency (K–5) goals. In fact, there's nothing concerning the foundational skills in the new standards that contradicts NCLB.

How could anyone misinterpret this? It may be wishful thinking on the part of those who disliked NCLB. But perhaps more important, it may be the result of the way the standards document is organized. Previous standards documents usually presented the foundational skills first, eventually getting to reading comprehension. The Common Core State Standards turn this around—they start with reading comprehension and end with the foundations. No matter the order, however, the new standards require as much early emphasis on decoding and fluency as in the recent past, and claims to the contrary are no more than myths.

Legend 3: English teachers can no longer teach literature in literature classes.

The Common Core State Standards have established 10 reading comprehension standards for each grade level. In grades K–5, these 10 standards are articulated in terms of how they apply to both literary and informational texts; in grades 6–12, there are two additional articulations (history and science). Clearly, the new standards involve more than just reading novels, stories, poems, and plays and interpreting literary devices.

And well they should. If one of the purposes of reading instruction is to empower students to learn, then even a cursory look at a high school or college curriculum (or the reading demands of the typical workplace) would suggest that literature makes up a small portion of what most people must read. According to international achievement tests, U.S. students do worse at reading informational text than they do at reading literary text (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007). This is not surprising, given the long-standing and persistent imbalance in student exposure to such texts in school reading programs (Moss & Newton, 2002; Venezky, 1982).

Over the past decade, the imbalance between literature and informational texts has been gradually redressed by various core reading programs. Reading essays, journalistic pieces, and the like have also become more common in high school literature programs.

What the Numbers Really Mean

But does any of this actually elbow aside literature from the English class? The new standards do accord informational text equal footing with literary text in the elementary grades. And literature only makes up 25 percent of the reading comprehension standards in grades 6–12 (but that's because informational, social studies, and science texts are all covered by the standards). The documents actually suggest that 70 percent of older students' reading should focus on nonliterary texts—but that 70 percent refers to *all* school reading, not just reading in English language arts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

For example, students will need to spend more time reading informational texts—but in their science and history classes. Teachers in these content areas will now need to play a larger role in teaching the literacy of those subjects (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

But English teachers don't need to stop teaching literature. The majority of texts students will study in English classes will still be novels, short stories, poems, and plays.

Legend 4: Teachers must teach students at frustration levels.

One of the biggest changes that the Common Core standards call for is an increased emphasis on challenging text. Traditionally, reading authorities have emphasized the value of teaching students using relatively easy texts—that is, texts that students can read with better than 90 percent accuracy and about 75–90 percent comprehension (Allington, 2009; Betts, 1946; Pinnell & Fountas, 1996), the idea being that students learn best when their ability closely matches the demands of the text.

However, there are many problems with that approach. First, the idea that matching students' reading levels to relatively easy text will improve their learning was never validated by research (Shanahan, 1983); some studies even challenge that idea (Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000). Second, studies have shown that the challenge level of U.S. textbooks has declined in grades 3–12 and that the descent of textbook levels has been associated with declines in student achievement (Hayes, Wolfer, & Wolfe, 1996). Third and perhaps most important, the reading demands of the workplace and college are strikingly higher than those confronted in typical high school classes (Mikulecky & Drew, 1991).

Accordingly, the Common Core State Standards indicate specific levels of text difficulty that students must be able to handle by the end of each school year. These new levels are considerably higher than current levels.

Working with Challenging Text

This important shift has misled some teachers to conclude that they should use challenging text even when it's inappropriate to do so. For example, the new standards don't raise text levels for kindergarten or 1st grade, but some educators think that 2nd graders won't meet the standards without an early boost. However, raising beginning text levels is not a good idea because it's more likely to slow student progress in mastering decoding than to improve students' reading.

Even with older students, the idea is not to have students reading challenging texts exclusively. Students should have an array of reading experiences in the same way that a long-distance runner has a varied training schedule that intersperses different distances and speeds. These varied schedules enable the runner to build muscle, speed, and endurance.

Likewise, nascent readers would benefit from a varied schedule of exercise as well. This means that students would, over the course of a school year (and even a school day), confront texts they could read easily with little teacher input as well as those in those upper bands specified by the standards. Over time, the average level of text difficulty should get more demanding. Students might read a relatively easy text after several intense workouts with more challenging ones. Any athlete will tell you that you *can* push too hard and that he or she needs intermittent breaks and reductions in intensity to keep going.

Legend 5: Most schools are already teaching to the new standards.

Not long ago, while working with a group of school principals, I explained the big changes that were coming because of the Common Core State Standards. Everyone burst out laughing.

Why the raucous response? The principals explained to me that officials from their state's education department had assured them that they were already meeting most of the Common Core requirements and that no big changes were necessary. My guess is that some harried official was trying to motivate them by claiming the changes wouldn't be that hard.

Not Old Wine in New Bottles

The problem with such assurances is that they're just not true. We *are* going to have to make some real changes in our practices.

I've mentioned several already: Reading lessons will need to shift away from an emphasis on prereading to greater attention to rereading and follow up. Because texts will be considerably harder, teachers will not only need to become more adept at motivating students to read but also more adept at teaching students to handle the rigors of demanding text without telling them what the texts say (Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012). There will need to be a greater emphasis on history and science texts in the upper grades and on informational texts at all grade levels.

In addition, writing instruction will need to focus more on writing about the ideas in texts and less on just putting personal thoughts into words. At the same time, reading will involve more critical analysis and synthesis of information from multiple texts. Each one of these changes is considerable and will require better and more appropriate professional development, instructional materials, and supervision.

Getting to Work

Educators who shrug off these changes will face a harsh reality. The Common Core State Standards are significantly higher than what we're used to. Currently, about 70 percent of students meet state standards and enter higher education. But these standards are set so misleadingly low that more than 40 percent of these "successful" students require remediation when they get to college, and most of those needing remediation will fail to graduate (Complete College America, 2012).

The new assessments now under development that are aligned to the Common Core standards are sure to provide students, parents, and communities with a clearer idea of how students are actually doing. We can either shift our practices now in response to these new, demanding standards—or we can wait until our communities find out how well we're *really* doing.

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