



## Meet Rod Leonard, Smith Middle School


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Rod is a fifth-year teacher in an urban middle school in a large southeastern city. The school district enrolls about 25,000 students per year and has a faculty of approximately 1,900 teachers. At his school, Rod teaches seventh-grade English language arts. The school enrolls 400 students with a 96 percent African American population, and 81 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. On average, twenty-four to thirty students attend class in fifty-minute blocks.

Rod's school is proud of its accomplishments and history. The school has earned national recognition as a High Flying School. In addition, the school earned two project renovation awards: Hibbett Sports Project and NBA Cares in partnership with BBVA Compass Bank. The principal, Dr. Willis, is a Milken Award-winning instructional leader who prides himself on developing teachers who can use research and performance data to determine best practices for the students. Dr. Willis promotes Project Based Learning (PBL) and differentiated instruction among his faculty, providing support through workshops and professional development opportunities on a consistent basis. Accustomed to a history of academic success, parents and community members expect the students to perform well despite the challenges that schools sometimes face (budget cuts, limited resources, larger class sizes, etc.).

Rod has been recognized by his principals as an effective teacher who positively affects student learning. His creative teaching style and interaction with students help them understand the content. However, despite his teaching success, Rod sometimes has reservations about what students can do amid such seemingly insurmountable challenges. He has only one class set of a three-year-old textbook for 125 students, so he cannot assign homework with them. The budget for the district, and the state, for that matter, has been cut significantly, so basic resources, such as paper, scissors, tape, and glue, are not as plentiful as in years past. District-mandated testing has increased in recent years, and even though teachers recognize that it is valuable to measure student growth, it sometimes feels like testing is taking more and more time away from instruction. This has affected teacher morale, parent involvement, and student pride, leaving a once energetic group a little disheartened by the circumstances.

These circumstances gradually affected Rod's teaching and at the beginning of the year, feeling test-weary, he started teaching his students standard by standard to make sure that the course of study was covered. He wanted to make sure that the objectives on the diagnostic tests, especially the ones that were missed by a majority of the students, were explicitly taught for extended periods of time. Each day the standard was the focus, not the holistic instruction. Rod noticed early in the year just how disinterested his students were becoming in their response to class. Students were strolling in the classroom close to the tardy bell. He also noticed his own lack of energy in his delivery of the content. Reading a passage from a text to find the main idea, Rod recalls losing his place and none of the students could help him recall where he was in the section. He felt as if he and the students were sinking. Rod quickly realized that this type of teaching, standard by standard, was not best for him or his students. He began to redesign his instruction for students to learn in more authentic ways after a summer with the Red Mountain Writing Project.



**Integrated Teaching and Learning**

After attempting to “teach to the standards,” Rod learned that his teaching and the students’ learning suffered from this approach. Engaging in frequent reflection and critical analysis of teaching practice can help teachers shift their approach when and where necessary.

### ***Connecting Literacy to Life: Rod’s Classroom***

Reinvigorated, Rod wanted his students to make connections with the outside world using writing as an authentic vehicle. Along with a university colleague, he designed a Social Justice Photo Journal unit to give voice to students about their world. The adapted idea was loosely based on an article from *English Journal*: “Seeing English in the City: Using Photography to Understand Students’ Literacy Relationships.” Rod and his colleague began to think about this concept in the middle school context. How could young adolescents do more with their literacy skills to affect their city? Designing the end of the unit first, the two began to plan. They decided that students should be able to create a portfolio of pictures and words that illustrated their chosen social issue. Students should be able to reflect

on the issue, describe the issue (pictures and words), and persuade stakeholders to help address the issue. This portfolio, they decided, would be a culmination of literacy skills, a two-week unit with integrated standards and objectives. The end result of the unit was designed for students to use writing and reading to positively affect their communities.



#### **Common Core State Standards**

Students produce clear and coherent journal entries to share with classmates, which addresses Writing Standard 4 of the CCSS. Students do this to clearly articulate their ideas about an issue, which they will later expand on through additional writing tasks.



#### **Honoring Diversity**

By allowing students to choose their own issues, Rod honors the diverse perspectives and life experiences his students bring to this learning task.



#### **Common Core State Standards**

Rod acknowledges through his Café Conversations that talk is important in the writing classroom. Opportunities to share, reflect, critique, and revisit a piece of writing affect students' products.

On the first day of the unit, Rod started class by asking students to write a journal entry about problems they see in their community. Before students wrote, he verbally modeled an example for them to better understand the expectations. After the students wrote, he allowed them to pair-share their responses. Rod rotated to different pairs in the room, listening to students discuss their entries. He then showed a YouTube clip from United Way, asking students to listen for additional societal challenges from the video participants. Rod recognized the importance of teaching students to view and critique media. Processing the new information gathered from the video clip, students then returned to their desks to add any problems that they had not addressed in their initial writing assignment. Students shared again in pairs.

Students ranked the issues according to their importance. Students numbered 1 to 5 on their papers, which helped them narrow their focus. Rod then asked students to circle the top choice and asked them to think about the issue in depth. Students then created questions about the one topic that interested them most.

Then Rod moved students into their Café Conversations. A model based on a coffeehouse setting, Café Conversations allowed students to discuss issues in a relaxed environment to encourage authentic talk and exchange of thoughts. Rod used this technique for students to gain insight from peers about issues and to help narrow their individual focus for the unit. While drinking orange juice and eating doughnuts, students talked about their issues in pairs or triads, seeking input to their questions. Students chose topics such as homelessness, poverty, litter, school improvement, obesity, children with disabilities, violence, and business growth in the city. Students wanted to know the following:

- Why are so many businesses leaving the city? Who can help bring them back?
- Why do we have so many people who are homeless on benches? What about the shelters?
- What does being obese lead to?
- When people with disabilities get older, what can they do?

Rod then modeled the photojournalistic piece of the project. He shared that the first step to problem-solving is to realize that a problem exists. Without taking pictures of people or body parts, not even fingers, he wanted students to think of twenty different ways to illustrate their social issue through pictures. He showed his images of homelessness through pictures of sleeping areas under bridges, park benches, a “Need work” sign, shopping carts, a US flag, etc. Students discussed their understanding of each one, analyzing the images of homelessness and offering suggestions for improving them. Rod anticipated that this critical exchange would affect students’ thinking about their own work. Visual literacies, like those in which Rod engages his students, are a powerful way for middle school students to express their understanding, critique their stance, and construct meaningful dialogue.

Students then returned to their Café Conversations to create a list of pictures they could take to represent their social issues. Students shared ideas across topics and collected a functional list of items and places that could help them tell their story through photos. To end class, Rod used an author share approach. Students who needed additional ideas would sit on the stool in front of the class. They would explain their project to the class, read ideas for photos to depict an issue, and gain additional ideas from classmates to add to their list. The class brainstormed ideas as Rod facilitated the discussion. At the end of class, students began to think about stakeholders who could help them improve the condition of the city, school, or community. One student expressed the empowerment felt by the class, saying, “I am going to take pictures of the things we need fixed at our school and send my letter to the superintendent!”

On subsequent days, Rod required students to complete assignments that would help them learn more about their social issue and their impact in the community. Students participated in Concentric Circles (also referred to as Fishbowl) to discuss strategies for community impact. The smaller circle of students or the “inside circle” was asked to talk about their topics in detail with a partner. The larger circle of students or the “outside circle” was asked to listen carefully. When signaled, the two began to exchange ideas that students could use to affect the community. For example, when Lisa and Donald discussed adults with disabilities, they brainstormed together a fundraiser for additional ramps and supplies for people with disabilities. Another pair talked about homelessness and a school coat drive. Rod then signaled that it was time for the people in the “outside circle” to talk about their projects while the “inside circle” listened. More ideas surfaced from this exchange. Talk and collaboration were an integral part of the inquiry process. Students discussed their issues with classmates and sometimes



### Common Core State Standards

Rod’s students prepare inquiry questions to guide their research of their chosen topics. This meets writing standards and also scaffolds students’ learning. This may also give Rod a chance to formatively assess his students’ thought and writing processes.



### Integrated Teaching and Learning

Research has shown that talk is an important part of the writing and thinking process. In this Fishbowl activity, students are required to learn from one another as they think about their ideas and hear others’ perspectives. They are also required to listen and provide feedback for their peers, which may affect their thoughts about their own projects.

challenged their classmates to think more deeply about issues. One student named a magazine picture of a secret camera “The Walls Have Eyes” as a way to prevent crime and make potential violators aware of the surveillance. Through discussion with his writing buddy, he was able to make a salient point that may have been undeveloped without the collaborative partnership.

Rod asked the students to think about who would be in the best position to help them develop their intervention projects. Each student researched agencies, government officials, school administrators, and community leaders who could assist them. With an audience in mind, students began to craft persuasive letters to the stakeholders about their important issues. The writing lesson started with the importance of knowing your audience to influence the greatest change. Rod and students talked about the importance of word choice and tone when writing a persuasive piece. He modeled an argumentative letter and, paragraph by paragraph, discussed the role of each section. Students commented on and critiqued Rod’s writing based on clarity, effectiveness, tone, and basic writing skills. The students then began to draft their own versions of argumentative writing, using each other as peer readers.

### *Learning Skills through Inquiry: Rod’s Journey*

Rod admits, “For a time there, I had underestimated what my students could do. I became so engrossed with teaching the standards and giving tests that I did not let my students’ learning needs come first. The students have really surprised me with their thinking. Through this teaching experience [Social Justice Photo Journal unit], I have actually transitioned into more of a facilitator.” As a facilitator, Rod monitored student learning and expected students to develop their own inquiries. He worked beside the students to encourage, direct, and enrich their understanding, but not to control their learning at every step. Rod realized the importance of student involvement in the learning process. During the Social Issues unit, students would actually ask about instruction for the day. (“What are we going to do today? Do we get our

pictures back? Can I go to the computer lab? Can I finish my letter?”) This was quite a different response from the usual “wait-on-the-teacher-to-teach-me” approach the students displayed prior to the unit. Rod had a greater appreciation for his students and what they could do. Sometimes, as teachers, we can get stuck in the day-to-day responsibilities of teaching: identifying the skills students do not know and reteaching them in isolation—checking off the objective boxes. Although this is needed at times, this should not take the place of the real-world, inquiry-based instruction that ties students to their context, enhances student thinking, and promotes endless questioning.



#### **Collaboration**

Rod collaborates both with other teachers through the Red Mountain Writing Project and with administrators at his school and in his district, which gives him the support he needs to think critically about his teaching and try new things in the classroom.

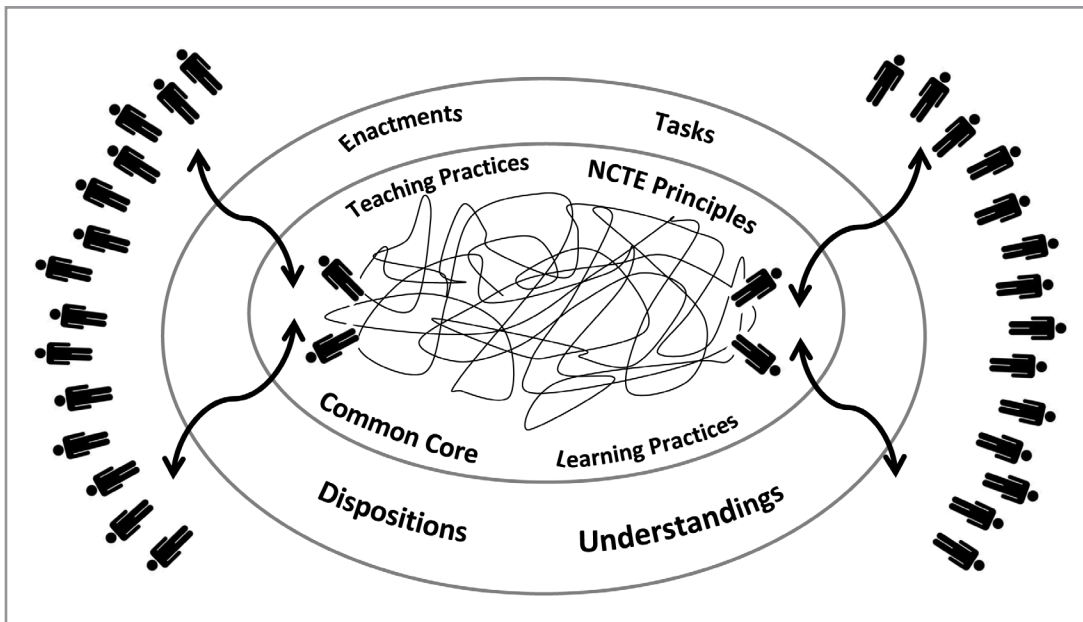
Rod attends local professional development opportunities provided by the school district and local, state, and national conferences. As an advanced fellow for the Red Mountain Writing Project, he understands the importance of reading and writing in the classroom. Rod has participated in the Red Mountain Writing Project for two years. During each experience, he has learned more about integrating authentic literacy learning experiences into a classroom often guided by schoolwide formative assessments. Rod admits that it has been difficult to balance the type of inquiry instruction he knows will engage the students and promote learning in the midst of a demanding testing climate that measures skills. It is a constant see-saw motion for him, but through his work with the Writing Project and other professional development activities, such as Pre-Advanced Placement training and Problem-Based Learning, he is learning more about teaching students at high levels. He attributes much of his learning to his district administrator and principal who promote professional learning at all levels. “I pick up tidbits wherever I go. I absorb from other teachers.”

Rod is a consummate learner himself who is always interested in improving his teaching. He has a mentor at school who is very supportive of his work. At the same time, he attends graduate school and works on projects with the Writing Project. Rod’s learning community extends from his school teaching team to a national circle of teachers he interacts with through the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project. From his work in graduate school, Rod has learned more about differentiated instruction, ways to look at the learners as individuals rather than as a whole class. Rod has started using more grouping in his class to meet the needs of students. He also has incorporated varied texts in his class, ranging from magazines to visual resource texts, to support all learners. Rod believes the CCSS will help teachers have conversations across grade levels and subject areas about effective instruction for students. He acknowledges their complexity, also. “[Adapting to the CCSS] will not happen overnight. This new conversation about CCSS is going to take time, but we must have patience and be open-minded.”

## **Charting the Practices**

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As Kathleen and Rod illustrate, how we think and talk about learning speaks volumes about what we value. The teachers in these vignettes jointly value fostering students’ lifelong learning and their development as readers and writers. As we illuminate a range of pathways by which teachers plan with this goal in mind, we would be negligent if we represented planning as a recipe with the same steps for all. In fact, our individual planning processes vary widely across time, courses, and students. Figure 2.1 represents the range of pathways, or processes, by which teachers consider the integration of their teaching and the learning they plan for students.



**FIGURE 2.1:** Pathways to planning and enacting instruction.

Through reflection or conversation, the teachers in these vignettes speak to some form of wrestling with chaos in describing their thinking about planning. Figure 2.1 represents the chaos that we all navigate, but it also seeks to honor the fact that how we enter this chaos—the pathways by which we get there—varies. Some teachers enter through knowledge about their students, which are represented in the figure as encompassing and informing our thinking. Some teachers enter by thinking about the ultimate goals they have for their students; these are represented in the language of the outer circle including the dispositions, understandings, tasks, and enactments teachers expect students to demonstrate or develop. No matter the entrance, once in the middle we ultimately navigate the chaos that involves carefully considering the meeting place and relationship between these goals and the CCSS/NCTE principles, our teaching practices, and the learning practices we personally develop as well as those we foster in our students. The narratives offered by Kathleen and Rod affirm that we meet these considerations through different pathways over time.

Figure 2.1 visually represents the way we conceptualize these inextricably linked considerations that are at the heart of our decision making as teachers. We intentionally chose not to represent them as linear, and one of our earliest versions of this figure actually included the words in the inner circle embedded within the chaos of the nest at the middle. Given the difficulty of actually reading this chaos, we chose in

favor of readability; however, the original visual may more accurately represent why at times it is difficult for us to articulate the complexity of our thinking, acting, and ongoing learning about how to work with and meet the needs of diverse learners. Still, we believe it is possible and quite critical that we work to identify our decision making as well as how we conceive of the elements that inform our decisions, especially as we remind ourselves and others that even as we prepare students to meet their standards, the CCSS do not dictate the path we choose.

We hope that you will keep Figure 2.1 in mind as you read the charts that follow and that you will find at the end of each vignette chapter. In these charts, we endeavor to represent how the instructional decisions that emerge out of the chaos are dynamic. For ease of representation, these charts read more linearly than the processes they depict. But they include the elements of our decision making and acting out of the chaos and toward deliberate goals and outcomes. Therefore, our movement toward the CCSS is informed by the NCTE principles about what makes for strong ELA instruction and learning. With these principles in mind, we enact teaching practices that invite students to learn in ways that will enable them to meet the CCSS. The relationship between teaching and learning practices is key. Our teaching opens the space and makes explicit for students how they can learn to take up particular tasks and to ultimately take on particular dispositions toward lifelong learning.

Therefore, the following charts highlight some of the key NCTE principles about and teaching practices for reading instruction that the teachers in this chapter's vignettes connect to specific Reading Anchor Standards in the CCSS document, merging how the two teachers expect students to evidence their ability to enact the standards in their learning.