Common Core State Standards: The Promise and the Peril in a National Palimpsest

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), released by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State Schools Officers in 2010, are the culmination of at least 25 years of emphasis on systemic school reform, using high-stakes assessments as a lever to improve the achievement of American schoolchildren. As a member of the review panel for the College and Career Ready Standards for English language arts, and of the Validation Committee that provided some oversight of the development process for both English language arts and mathematics, I have come to see both the promise and the peril posed by the documents that resulted.

From my perspective, the CCSS offers a strong and well-intentioned vision of the knowledge and skills needed by a college- and career-ready high school graduate. In drawing the implications of that vision from kindergarten to grade 12, however, the CCSS documents are a palimpsest, with deeply embedded traces of our ongoing professional and political debates about the nature of effective curriculum and instruction in the English language arts. These debates are wide-ranging, from the conflict between phonics and whole language in beginning reading, to the balance of literary versus informational text in reading instruction, to the role of explicit instruction in teaching vocabulary and usage, to on-demand versus process-oriented writing tasks.

Because the vestiges of those debates are embedded in the CCSS, it is critical that they be implemented within the context of our best professional judgment about the dimensions of effective teaching and learning—and that the many special interest groups not be allowed to use the CCSS selectively to further their own agendas. The complexity of the CCSS, the high-stakes environment in which they are being implemented, and the rush to develop new assessment measures are combining to create serious challenges to the effective teaching of English. To help us understand both the challenges and the possibilities, in this article I want to look at where the CCSS came from, their strengths and weaknesses, and how as a profession we can best respond to the challenges they pose.

Where the Common Core State Standards Came From

The CCSS are shaped in great part by the history of what went before. This included a series of attempts at voluntary national standards, beginning with those offered by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989. Federal involvement followed quickly and rather disastrously: a standards project on English language arts, sponsored jointly by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association and funded in 1992 by the US Department of Education, had its funding cancelled after two years of work, at least in part because it took a relatively constructivist view of curriculum and instruction. (The collaborating organizations completed the work on their own; NCTE and IRA.) Another effort, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), produced a set of standards for history (National Center for History in the Schools, 1997), which were met with favor by my profession and much suspicion by the American Historical Association.
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Students who were proficient in Mississippi might discover they were barely passing if they moved to Massachusetts.

Out of this confusion came the Common Core State Standards project, sponsored by two organizations that represented the states rather than the federal government. The process was rapid and large scale, with separate teams for English and math, and provision for extensive feedback from stakeholder organizations and the public. The process began by developing a set of College and Career Readiness Standards, which were later “back mapped” to provide grade-by-grade guidance on how best to ensure that high school graduates were indeed college and career ready. As feedback poured in, there were substantial revisions between drafts of the standards, and the documents themselves ballooned in size. The English language arts standards alone has 63 pages for the main document, accompanied by 3 appendices that total another 333 pages and 6 pages of introductory materials.

Given the speed with which the standards were written and the many layers of input from stakeholders, the document that has resulted contains the residues of all of our professional disagreements about the teaching of the English language arts. Whatever you consider most important in the teaching of reading and writing, you can find it somewhere in the standards and its accompanying documentation. And so can those who disagree.

The Promise of CCSS

The strengths of the English language arts standards lie in four areas: (1) a strong vision in the college and career readiness standards, (2) a central place for writing within an integrated view of the language arts, (3) a helpful view of progress in reading comprehension, and (4) broadly shared responsibility for literacy instruction.

College and Career Readiness Standards

The vision of what students should know and be able to do was developed first and became the “anchor standards” in the final document. These standards were stated clearly and relatively parsimoniously, with ten standards for reading, ten for writing, and six for speaking and listening; a separate set of six standards for language was added later in the process. The vision of a student who is college and career ready is difficult to argue with. Such students demonstrate independence; build strong content knowledge; respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline; comprehend as well as critique; value evidence; use technology and digital media strategically and appropriately; and come to understand other perspectives and cultures (7). Even at the level of specific standards, the goals reflect a broadly shared vision of the English language arts. The writing standards, for
example, essentially say students need to be able to write effective argument, exposition, and personal narrative (Standards 1 through 3); adapt their text to audience and purpose through effective planning, revising, editing, and rewriting using appropriate technologies for developing and sharing the work (Standards 4 through 6); conduct research to build and share knowledge, using and evaluating a variety of appropriate textual and electronic resources (Standards 7 through 9); and write routinely for a variety of purposes and audiences, including both short and extended writing projects (Standard 10).

A Central Place for Writing

The high-stakes testing environment created by No Child Left Behind has privileged reading as the essential element of the English language arts curriculum, leaving writing instruction at risk. CCSS, on the other hand, elevates writing to a central place, not only giving it the same number of individual standards as reading but also making writing the central way in which content knowledge is developed and shared. (The surrounding documentation also claims to take an “integrated model of literacy” [4], though this is undercut by the traditional parsing of standards into reading, writing, and speaking and listening.)

A Helpful Vision of Reading Comprehension

The anchor standards for reading, like those for writing, reflect a broad consensus about what students should know and be able to do. As outlined in a sidebar, “students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts. Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements” (10). Given this broad vision, comprehension development is seen to have two parts: the sophistication and textual complexity of what students are reading, and the knowledge and skills brought to the text. This emphasis on comprehension development as the ability to deal with increasingly sophisticated and complex text moves curriculum and instruction away from a component skills approach to reading instruction that can too easily lose sight of the broader goals of developing understanding.

Shared Responsibility for Literacy

The published version of the CCSS ended up with a long, awkward, and misleading title: Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. The title is misleading in that the standards for English language arts (as for the other disciplines) are really standards for literacy, paying no attention to the disciplinary knowledge in language, literature, and composition that provide the primary contexts within which students will develop their literacy skills. Nevertheless the title reflects the recognition that reading and writing instruction should be central to each of the core disciplines. Put another way, middle school and high school English teachers should not be held responsible for teaching students how to read and write the content-area texts emphasized throughout the CCSS. Contrary to the way this is playing out in many states and districts, the standards documents emphasize a relatively traditional English curriculum of reading and writing about literature and literary nonfiction, a handful of “foundational” documents, and public discourse.

Although by grade 12 the CCSS (following the lead of the National Assessment of Educational Progress) proclaim that 70 percent of a student’s reading should be informational, a frequently ignored footnote is quite clear: “The percentages on the table reflect the sum of student reading, not just reading in ELA settings. Teachers of senior English classes, for example, are not required to devote 70 percent of reading to informational texts. Rather, 70 percent of student reading across the grade should be informational” (5). A second footnote makes the same point about the distribution of writing tasks.

The emphasis on reading and writing in the disciplines does not contradict the English teacher’s special expertise in oral and written language development. Instead, it recognizes that there are some fundamentally different expectations about making appropriate interpretations, building effective arguments, and mustering relevant evidence in the various academic disciplines (see Applebee and Langer, Writing; Langer, Envisioning). English teachers can play a supportive role to colleagues in other departments who have in the past paid less
attention to teaching students how to approach their disciplinary reading and writing, but English teachers should not be called on to take over this discipline-based language learning. (Even without the CCSS, over half of the writing that middle and high school students currently do is for subjects other than English, though such writing tends to be assigned rather than taught; see Applebee and Langer, “Snapshot,” Writing.)

The Perils of CCSS

If the CCSS has the potential to do some good, it has at least equal potential to distort curriculum and instruction. My concerns fall into four areas: (1) the separate emphasis on foundational skills, (2) the grade-by-grade standards, (3) the lack of a developmental model for writing, and (4) issues of implementation.

Foundational Skills

The original version of the College and Career Readiness Standards was relatively parsimonious, focused on broad accomplishments rather than the supporting skills that would be brought to bear in the context of the larger tasks. In the final document, however, this focus on meaningful tasks is compromised with separate lists of foundational skills for reading (K–5) and language (K–12). How such skills should be treated in curriculum and instruction has long been controversial within the profession; foregrounding them with separate sections in the CCSS greatly increases the likelihood that they will become the focus of drill-and-practice activities that deprive these skills of context, meaning, and usefulness.

At the middle school and high school levels, these issues are aggravated by the lack of a substantive research base for the sequencing of language skills across the grades. To take one example among many, Language Standard 1b at grade 7 reads: “Choose among simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences to signal differing relationships among ideas.” This is followed at grade 8 by: “Form and use verbs in the active and passive voice” (52). This sequence is at best arbitrary—the structures selected for emphasis at both grade levels are ones that the vast majority of native speakers will use spontaneously by the time they enter kindergarten, and it is hard to understand how active and passive voice is more difficult for middle grade students than compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. Rather than acquisition of syntax, the Language Standards may have some underlying concern with application of grammatical terminology, but even so the sequence and specification is at best arbitrary and irrelevant to significant growth in students’ language skills. But such standards seem destined to drive curriculum and instruction in many schools and classrooms in unfortunate directions.

Grade-by-Grade Standards

In thinking about curriculum and instruction, it makes sense to look across the accomplishments specified at a particular grade level—what teachers are responsible for ensuring their particular students know and are able to do. Looking at the CCSS in this way, however, can mask the distortions that this kind of itemization can create in a subject such as English language arts, where development of underlying reading, writing, and language skills involves the recursive application of available skills to ever more complex and specialized texts and tasks rather than the development of new content knowledge. (The CCSS in fact do not address the literary and rhetorical content of English language arts, only the accompanying linguistic skills.)

The triviality of the grade-level distinctions shows up quickly wherever one looks. Reading Standard 1 for grade 7 Informational Text, for example, reads: “Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.” By grade 8, the same standard reads: “Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.” And at grade 9, “Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” (39; emphasis added to highlight changes across grade levels). As a guide to curriculum and instruction, this breakdown is at best bizarre; nobody is going to wait until grade 9 to suggest that students select the best evidence to support their point, or wait until grade 8 to ask for “several” pieces of evidence when more than one is available.

Or again Writing Standard 2b for grades 6 and 7 reads: “Develop the topic with relevant facts,
definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples." By grade 8 this includes: “Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples” (42). And at grades 9 and 10: “Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience’s knowledge of the topic” (45; emphasis added). As with the previous example, the grade-by-grade elaborations of this standard focus on characteristics that should be implicit in the writing at each of the grade levels. If facts are “relevant” (grades 6 and 7), they presumably are relevant with respect to “the audience’s knowledge of the topic” (postponed to grades 9 and 10).

The point here is not simply that it is difficult to specify appropriate grade-level differences in this way, but that such specification can lead to a distortion of curriculum and instruction. In the high-stakes world in which we now teach and learn, it is not unreasonable to expect that we will see curricula that postpone audience considerations until grade 9 for this kind of writing, and emphasize “extended” definitions at grade 9 as well, whether they are necessary to the development of the topic or not.

Lack of a Developmental Model for Writing

Although the grade-by-grade standards for both reading and writing trivialize the movement from one level to the next, the larger discussion of the development of reading comprehension provides a helpful framework for thinking about development, one that builds from and moves beyond much recent work in comprehension (see CCSS, Appendix A).

The treatment of writing in CCSS, on the other hand, lacks a similar framework for thinking about the nature of accomplished performance. This leads to an emphasis on formal characteristics of types of texts, as in Writing Standard 2 for grade 6, which reads in full:

2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
   a. Introduce a topic; organize ideas, concepts, and information, using strategies such as definition, classification, comparison/contrast, and cause/effect; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., charts, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.
   b. Develop the topic with relevant facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.
   c. Use appropriate transitions to clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.
   d. Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.
   e. Establish and maintain a formal style.
   f. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from the information or explanation presented. (42)

The subheads in this description address a variety of features of language use, organization, and development—features that in an assessment context would usually be addressed through a writing rubric and anchor papers. The problem in the CCSS is that laying these features out in this way not only leads, as we have seen, to trivial grade-to-grade progressions but also suggests a specific set of emphases for curriculum and instruction at each grade. And unfortunately the emphases suggested tend toward the formulaic and perfunctory, rather than supporting the development of a flexible array of strategies for addressing a wide variety of specific audiences and purposes.

The lack of a richer developmental model for writing is particularly disappointing in that an alternative seems ready at hand, in the approach taken to reading comprehension. All of the factors used to discuss the developmental complexity of a reading passage could apply equally well to students’ writing. These include qualitative factors such as “levels of meaning or purpose; structure; language conventionality and clarity; and knowledge demands”; quantitative dimensions such as “word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion . . . typically measured by computer software”; individual considerations “such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences”; and task characteristics “such as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned” (Appendix A, page 4). A writing curriculum built around such a vision would be much richer than one built to conform to the Writing Standards as they are currently formulated.

The CCSS documents in fact leave room for such a richer curriculum, stating explicitly that the
standards focus on “results rather than means. By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed” (4). Unfortunately, in the press to implement the CCSS few states or districts seem willing to take on the challenge of how best to reach those goals, rather than focusing curriculum and instruction directly on the standards themselves.

Issues of Implementation

I have already mentioned many of my concerns about how the CCSS may be implemented—concerns about distorting the curriculum in English language arts to include more informational text than the standards actually intended; concern about trivial curricular progressions across grades; and concerns about an emphasis on supporting skills and strategies outside of the social and disciplinary contexts that give them meaning and importance. Having said all of that, my greatest concern is in the evolution of the assessments that are being developed to accompany the standards. The CCSS have been billed as providing voluntary state standards, but the policy choices that have followed their publication suggest they are more federal than state, and only voluntary if a state is willing to give up considerable resources. The Race to the Top competition included adoption of CCSS as one of its major evaluation criteria; and the US Department of Education has awarded some $330 million to support two independent test development consortia: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (http://www.parcconline.org/) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (http://www.smarterbalanced.org/).

Both groups are committed to having new systems ready for implementation in the 2014–15 academic year, including both formative and summative assessments designed to tap deeper understandings that will, at least some of the time, be expressed in writing. Unfortunately the constraints on these assessments are similar to those on the state assessments they are meant to replace. The tasks that are being developed are tied to the CCSS, not to the curriculum. As such, any writing that is required will likely be based on material contained in the test situation itself, rather than drawing on subject-area knowledge developed over a semester or year (as in portfolio-based assessments, for example, or the kinds of curriculum-based writing called for in some Advanced Placement classes and the International Baccalaureate program). Because of time constraints, both consortia are continuing to make heavy use of multiple-choice (renamed as “selected response”) and short-response formats. Pressures from states concerned about the feasibility and expense of testing have already led to reductions in the time allotted for performance items, a tension that is likely to increase as implementation draws nearer.

The form and content of these new assessments will have more impact on curriculum and instruction than the CCSS themselves; high stakes are attached to assessment results, not to the standards they are meant to reflect. In our recently completed National Study of Writing Instruction, for example, we found that teachers across subject areas feel compelled to focus their curriculum on the form and content of the high-stakes tests that students take (Applebee and Langer, “Snapshot,” Writing), in particular on the multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank tasks that carry the majority of points, coupled with some formulaic on-demand writing. These pressures are highest in schools and districts with more challenging demographics, exacerbating rather than reducing inequities between the poor and the privileged. As new assessments are implemented and revised over the next several years, it will be important to examine them against the broader goals of the CCSS, particularly the vision of a college and career-ready graduate, and to insist that such goals be included in one way or another in the high-stakes evaluation system. Standard 10 for Reading and Standard 10 for Writing, for example, both emphasize the need for depth and breadth in student experiences; the assessment systems that emerge must preserve this emphasis rather than placing all of the emphasis on tasks that can be completed in a tightly controlled assessment context.

Making the Standards Work for the Profession

The CCSS do not end our professional debates about how best to support students’ learning in the English language arts, but they do give them a
new urgency and focus. If the CCSS give us a new formulation of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills our students should be developing, how can we best ensure that they attain these goals? One alternative that many schools have chosen in the high-stakes testing environment has been to teach directly to the test, turning curriculum and instruction into an extended version of "test prep." Such an approach can have short-term payoffs in test performance, but the longer-term results are not encouraging—when the tests change or students move on to new contexts, they don’t have the wide repertoire of knowledge and skills to continue to do well. Judith A. Langer’s studies of middle schools and high schools where students have succeeded “against the odds” suggest a different vision of curriculum and instruction, one that emphasizes engaging students in challenging subject matter while providing them with the knowledge and skills to engage with the material successfully (Langer, Getting).

I have described such an approach to curriculum as a focus on the disciplinary conversations in which we want students to be able to engage, taking conversation in a grand sense to include reading, writing, and discussion across genres and media (Applebee). Successful curricular conversations require topics worth talking about, appropriate background or specialized knowledge, and an ability to take positions, make arguments, and evaluate evidence in ways appropriate to the discipline. The CCSS summarizes one set of knowledge and skills that students need to participate in such conversations. It specifies a wide range of skills that are important for students to master—but it does not provide the content with which students need to engage. To make our curriculum and instruction work—to ensure that our students do meet the standards that have been laid out for them—we need to foreground the questions that are worth engaging with, asking at every level, as Jim Burke has put it, What’s the Big Idea?

The units that Burke describes are good examples of instruction organized around high-quality materials that directly support attainment of the standards for English language arts outlined in CCSS (or in Burke’s cases, the English language arts standards for California). Because so many states and districts are moving in the opposite direction, redesigning curriculum to directly address the skills called for in the CCSS, it is worth looking at Burke’s approach in some detail.

One of the units that Burke describes (130–153) revolves around a book mandated by his and many other districts for the ninth-grade year: Of Mice and Men. As Burke describes his thinking about the unit, he notes that “it is important when teaching big ideas to begin with the end in mind, choosing not only a question that can sustain prolonged inquiry but also the texts, assignments, and assessments that will ensure that students learn the many different skills and gain the breadth of knowledge we expect of them during their time in our class” (130). Burke’s choice was “Am I my brother’s keeper?”—a question not only deeply related to the novel but also allowing him to bring in an array of other works.

The unit begins with activities designed to familiarize Burke’s students with the landscape and era of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. This included using Google Earth to show students the Salinas Valley, which they compared with the opening lines describing this same scene in Steinbeck’s novel. They explored this further through a selection of Dorothea Lange’s photographs from this era, viewed and discussed through the lens of the guiding question. Burke’s activities in this introductory part of the unit are geared toward three standards from CCSS (Writing Standard 2d, Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic; Language Standard 6 [Grade 9], Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases; and Reading Anchor Standard 7, Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words).

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The students approach the novel through a series of reading guides that help them comprehend and interpret the novel as it unfolds. The questions Burke provides are focused but wide ranging, varying from chapter to chapter. Across the set, they help develop students’ understanding of such literary devices as characterization, foreshadowing,
mood, plot structure, and theme. They also provide practice in important reading strategies, such as predicting, connecting, question-generating, and inferring, with scaffolding that pushes students to defend their responses with appropriate evidence drawn from the text as well as their own experience. The students’ responses to the study guide function, in Burke’s words, “as invitations to and preparations for substantial discussion in class” (140). These activities also embed preparation directly relevant to CCSS, including Grade 9 Reading Standards 1, 2, and 3 (which deal with analysis of key ideas and contributing details), Reading Standard 4 (Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text . . . ; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone), and Speaking and Listening Standard 1 (Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions [one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led] with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively).

In addition to discussions built around the reading guides, Burke’s class analyzed key scenes from multiple perspectives, including comparison between the original text and its depiction in the film version of Of Mice and Men (Reading Standard 7, Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums . . . ). At this point, the class also spent some time adapting passages of the novel to scripts that they then had to mark up with director’s or actor’s notes as to how to speak the lines as part of study of tone and as a way of reading the text more closely (Reading Standard 4, Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone; Burke, personal communication). Once students are fully engaged in the novel, Burke complicates and broadens the discussion by introducing a variety of other texts that echo the guiding question, Am I My Brother’s Keeper?, including an advertisement from the Red Cross that asserts, among other things, that “America is a place where we look out for each other” (144), the cover from Jodi Picoult’s novel My Sister’s Keeper, and a selection of personal essays from Denzel Washington’s collection, A Hand to Guide Me (Reading Standard 9, Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take).

As the class neared the end of the novel, Burke’s students began work on a multistep essay about the “allies in our lives,” “focusing on narrative writing that also includes an analytic element about the qualities and effects of mentors” (145). This essay became another part of the overarching conversation about the obligations we have to others, spinning directly off of the models in Denzel Washington’s collection (which itself came from Washington’s work with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America). This work reinforced an array of specific standards, including Writing Standard 3, Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences; Writing Standard 5, Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience; Language Standards 1 and 2 (Conventions of Standard English); and Language Standard 3, Apply knowledge of language . . . to make effective choices for meaning or style.

The unit concluded with an in-class “blog fest” that presented excerpts from Barack Obama’s address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, in which he declared “it is that fundamental belief, I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper, that makes this country work.” Students were given detailed directions that encouraged them to consider the Obama text in light of their discussions of Of Mice and Men, posing questions that “lead to new and deeper thinking about the subject,” make “connections to the text yourself, other texts, and the world,” and “provide support from the text or other reliable sources.” Students began by posting their own responses to the texts and then continued to ask questions in response to one another’s posts, asking their classmates “to clarify and defend their ideas.” The assignment included a variety of sentence starters modeling effective strategies for developing arguments and providing evidence, and it ended by asking for “a final commentary that ties together your thoughts and those of others” (149). Following the Allies essay assignment, the blog-fest provided an engag-
ing activity that allowed students to pull together their work during the unit while exploring a format and medium that was, for some, a new experience. Again, these activities addressed an array of specific standards, including Grade 9 Informational Reading Standard 9, Analyze seminal US documents of historical and literary significance... including how they address related themes and concepts; Grade 9 Writing Standard 1, Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence; and Writing Standard 6, Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

I have presented Burke’s unit at some length to make the point that aligning our teaching to the CCSS does not mean we need to abandon all that we have learned about effective curriculum and instruction. Burke’s lessons are quite overtly aligned to standards (the California standards in place at the time, rather than the CCSS that came later). Rather than teaching to the tests, these lessons focus on engaging students in cognitively and linguistically challenging tasks in the course of which they will gain the knowledge and skills that the standards require.

Units with the richness and imagination of those that Burke describes in What’s the Big Idea? reflect a coming together of the wisdom of practice with the best of current research and theory on the teaching of English language arts. Such teaching does not offer the simple prescriptions that guide classrooms that focus curriculum and instruction more directly on the standards and the tests that accompany them. But the paradox is that by not teaching to the test, students in classrooms like Burke’s will do better on tests in general, and at the same time develop the knowledge and skills to do well in other contexts of schooling, life, and work. And schools will be much more interesting places to be, for teachers and students alike.

Works Cited