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Coming Full Circle: A Young Teacher’s Journey with the Standards Movement

When I graduated from my teacher preparation program in 2005, I was equipped with an untested level of confidence and the infamous “Green Book” of Ohio’s Academic Content Standards. I was ready to take on the world and create literate citizens of our democracy. I had already signed a contract with a local school district and even had a copy of the course of study. With no summer job, I spent the three months leading up to the first day of school creating extensive unit plans for each novel I would be teaching. By the middle of August, there were six boxes lining the walls in my tiny apartment, each dedicated to a unit plan replete with reading calendars, handouts, projects, and assessments. I was prepared, or so I thought.

On the first day of school, I greeted my ninth-grade students at the door with a copy of The Odyssey.

“Please take a packet from the box, and find your seat.”

“Good morning! Welcome to Ms. Cherry’s English Class. You have a green information sheet on your desk. Complete it and turn it in tomorrow for five extra credit points. Be detailed; I want to know all about you! This is your packet for our first novel, The Odyssey. Bring this packet to class every day. It has everything you will need to complete the novel. Do not read ahead; do not complete any assignments without further instruction. If you lose this packet, I will not replace it. This packet will serve as your study guide for the end-of-novel test. You are very smart, so, if you do your best, everything will be fine. Any questions? No? Good!”

The students were stunned. They sat in their chairs wide-eyed and visibly afraid. Over the next several months the look of fear morphed into a stewing resentment that made teaching and learning painful. As June approached, we had all given up.

In a class discussion about surviving the first year of high school, I asked the students what they looked forward to most next year, and one of my students, Matt, enthusiastically said to his neighbor, but loud enough for the entire class to hear, “Not having Ms. Cherry as a teacher.” I was crushed, and I am sure that the change in my countenance was visible. My students looked at me, unmoved, almost as if to communicate to me how much they agreed with their outspoken peer. When the bell rang, I sat at my desk and thought about what Matt said. I realized that I longed to be rid of my students as much as they longed to be rid of me. My concern was how we found ourselves in such a predicament.

A sobering thought crept through my mind: It was me. It was my fault. I made my students hate learning. I choked the life out of them, but I did it for their own good. They would thank me next year, when they passed their Ohio Graduation Test with flying colors.

I did everything that the standards told me. The “Green Book” was our bible, and we followed it to the letter. I made sure that we went over every benchmark and indicator within the year. They knew how to craft the perfect short-answer response; they knew how to sniff out the main idea...
in any paragraph; they could milk a context clue for all it was worth; and don’t get me started on parenthetical citations and bibliographies! They were geniuses! Well, until I asked them to create something of their own. They were giants among test-takers, but they were mere mortals when it came to self-expression and using the power of literacy for their own purposes. *What* had I done?

**When We Determined Our Potential**

It took months of soul-searching before I was able to admit the truth. I allowed the rhetoric of the accountability movement and standards-based education to creep in and overtake my convictions about teaching and learning. It happened subtly, over the course of several courses, workshops, and professional development sessions, where “experts” told me that the world was changing and we had to compete with other countries to protect our children’s futures. I was fighting to prepare students to compete in a new global economic landscape. The standards were my weapons. If I followed the standards, my students would be fine. Students’ futures depended on my unwavering adherence to skills acquisition. What I learned in college was no longer relevant. The progressive ideas about the purpose of education given to us by John Dewey, Lisa Delpit, and Paulo Freire were no longer respected. These ideas did not produce data; thinking for oneself could not be quantified and used to measure student performance. The rhetoric was so compelling and the messages were so urgent that it was difficult for any newly minted teacher to resist the temptation to conform against her better judgment. I was as much a victim as my students were. Together, we paid the price. We were alienated from each other, and we were alienated from ourselves. The results were devastating.

**The Standards Movement and Its Effect on Student-Teacher Relationships**

Everything I learned and believed, prior to being overtaken by the standards movement, instilled a conviction that relationships were important in the learning process. Sustainable literacy and responsible knowledge production—the goals of an English teacher—are developed in personal ways. Students need to trust teachers to be vulnerable enough to share their meaning-making processes, and to share the unique ways they demonstrate and articulate their thoughts about the world. As a first-year teacher, I gathered information about my students—the music they listened to, the books they read, the lives they lead outside of the classroom—but I did not use that important information to inform my interactions with my students and bridge a gap between the classroom and the outside world. I did not create a classroom environment that encouraged the exchange of ideas or respect for one another as capable knowledge producers. I communicated to them that their lives were secondary to the learning that went on in the classroom and that if their learning could not be quantified, then it was not important. This served to alienate us. They did not see me as a partner in learning; instead, they saw me as a supervisor. The rift that existed between my students and me eventually informed another rift that grew within my students. They learned how to separate their personhood from their student-hood. They read *Romeo and Juliet* and did not see themselves in the characters; instead, they thought about the difference between monologue and soliloquy. They read *Great Expectations* and failed to connect with Miss Havisham’s pain; instead, they located and listed examples of figurative language in neat graphic organizers. They learned to understand every learning experience as a chance to satisfy a benchmark and an indicator. I too began to go through the motions. I disconnected from the woman who wanted to transform our democracy through the lives of my students, and I lived the persona of a data-driven dictator. We were starved for authentic and meaningful connections with the curriculum and, most importantly, with each other. Instead of acknowledging the truth, we blamed each other. I saw my students as disengaged and shallow, and my students saw me as boring and uncompromising. Our lives became a cycle of formative and summative assessments, of checkmarks and percentages, of five days on and two days off. June finally came, and we saw an escape from each other.
When I acknowledged the failure that was my first year of teaching, I seriously considered leaving the profession, but I couldn’t. I was a teacher to the core. The only choice left for me was to go back to the drawing board and create in myself the teacher that I knew I could be. I had the skills, the content knowledge, and the drive to be a great teacher, but something had overshadowed those things.

After a great deal of reflecting, journaling, and talking with other teachers, I came to the conclusion that the standards were the problem. It was not simply the standards; instead, it was an unhealthy relationship with them that caused my first year to be a disaster. I trusted the standards more than I trusted my ability as a professional.

When I was honest about the extent to which an unhealthy relationship with the standards compromised my professionalism and integrity as a classroom teacher, I made a choice. I chose to redefine myself as a professional, one who had endured a rigorous teacher preparation program, been licensed to practice pedagogy, and one who committed herself to continued development. This decision imbued me with a level of agency and efficacy that was unattainable until then.

As a newly defined professional, I challenged myself to be savvy about my classroom instruction and the ways in which standards informed it. I reread and reinterpreted the standards, not as a document dictating the possibilities of my instruction but as a reference. I mined the standards for key skills and concepts that were accurately part of the document and used those as complements to lesson plans and units that were culturally relevant and academically complementary to my students’ lived experiences and literacy needs. I discovered the NCTE standards that were written with a flexibility that communicated my right as a professional to decide how and when they should be implemented. I also reignited a commitment to teach my students not as products, but as human beings capable of transforming society through their newfound and unique literacies. Finally, I committed to writing into each of my lesson plans a standard for democratic living and learning. My students would not only learn how to read and write for someone else’s purposes, but they would also become agential learners with sustainable literacies they would use to speak back to and challenge their communities, locally and abroad.

When school began in the fall, the results were immediate. On the first day, I did not greet them with a prefabricated packet of meaningless information to guide the next five weeks. Instead, I greeted them as human beings.

“Good morning, and welcome to our class! I am very excited about this year! I won’t tell you everything I have in store for you yet. Today, we are just going to take some time to get to know each other. Learning is a personal thing, and the more we know about each other, the more we can create learning experiences that mean something to us. So, let’s get started!”

The results were phenomenal! We read *Of Mice and Men* and not only analyzed the significance of the characters’ struggles but also analyzed our own ecosystem of power and privilege and instituted ways of supporting more equitable treatment of our peers. Many students volunteered to help me organize and host our annual Teaching Tolerance Mix-It-Up lunch as a result of critically reading this novel. We read *Lord of the Flies* and not only
analyzed it as an allegory but also endeavored to write our own. Students wrote short stories about how major social issues, such as racism and classism, negatively affected their suburban schooling experiences.

More exciting than the critical ways we were interacting with the curriculum, we were also forming healthy and supportive relationships with one another and learning to see each other as human beings with unique talents and abilities. In 2011, when a series of tornadoes tore through the southern states, we came together, coauthored a collection of poems and artwork, and sold it to raise money for relief efforts. We shared the work based on our talents. Some students wrote poetry; some students wrote short stories; some students created collages and pencil drawings; some students created a publicity campaign that resulted in more than 200 copies being sold over a two-week period; and other students researched and chose the charities that would receive the proceeds. At the end of the project, one of my most reticent students thanked the class and commented that she felt alone for most of her school career, but now she felt like she belonged. As a class, we were living out the goal of quality education, making meaningful connections.

Back to Reality

I taught for five more years after I made the choice to be the teacher I wanted to be. In my sixth year, I hosted a student teacher. She was bright, passionate, and eager. She reminded me of myself. She too came with her “Green Book” held tightly in hand. We spent hours of planning and debating about the efficacy of the standards. She witnessed the results of my new and improved teaching, but she attributed the results to a seamless integration of the standards, not to a seamless integration of the private and the public. She was already convinced that instead of complementing good teaching, the standards undergirded it. I spent the entire year demonstrating backwards planning to prove that it was the opposite. I could not change her mind.

After that experience, I realized that if teachers were going to ever reclaim themselves and the profession from unhealthy relationships with the standards, it had to start early in the preparation process—perhaps in the teacher preparation program. I packed my bags, literally, and sought a position in higher education.

Standards Invade Higher Education

When I left the classroom, I felt a sense of loss. I loved teaching literature, and I loved helping students influence their communities. However, the need to warn preservice teachers of the dangers that I experienced helped me to make the final decision to seek employment within a teacher preparation program. When I interviewed with program chairs and deans, they all eagerly explained that what their students needed was someone with recent classroom experience, who could tell them what was happening in the “real world.” When I finally accepted a position, I found myself in a familiar place, full of untested confidence, and the experience I needed to make an impact. What awaited me was not surprising, but it was heartbreaking. Instead of the infamous “Green Book,” students were now equipped with binders containing the Common Core State Standards. When I began to investigate and research the Common Core, I found the same problems I found with Ohio’s Academic Content Standards. They were too narrow, they were inconsiderate of students’ lived experiences, and they were missing the voice and expertise of classroom teachers.

My new students, some of them true scholars with the potential to be dynamic teachers, were developing the same unhealthy relationship with the standards that I developed when I was in their shoes. When I asked them about the effectiveness of their written lesson plans the answer was simple—a good lesson plan meant the objectives and assessments correspond with the standards, and student performance is measurable.

I asked another question: “Where is the student in the lesson?” To that question, students answered, “Well, according to the standards, the students should have learned the appropriate prior knowledge last year.” For the first semester, I thought I would go crazy. Every critical question I asked was met with a regurgitated response about the standards.
I changed my approach for the second semester.

“Good afternoon! Welcome to Early Childhood Language Arts Methods. This class will begin to bring into perspective all of the concepts that you have learned in much of your content-area coursework. We are going to be writing lesson plans and testing them out on real p–12 students! Are you excited? I sure am. There’s just one thing.”

Like my high school ninth graders from the past, my college students looked at me with trepidation in their eyes.

“According to the Common Core State Standards, you should have an impressive command of the English language. So, you won’t mind taking this quiz for me, right?”

The quiz was written to assess key grammar concepts, but it was disjointed and not connected to the way my students use language. My students failed horribly. I came to class the next day and was greeted by scathing looks and withdrawal slips.

“I guess you all want to discuss the quiz, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, shoot. What’s your first question?”

The students bombarded me with several.

“Why would you give us a quiz over things you had no evidence that we ever learned?”

“You didn’t have anything to go by when it came to prior knowledge! I use a writing tutor for God’s sake!”

“This is not good teaching, how are we supposed to learn from you?”

“I am a great writer, I even write for the school newspaper. I just don’t use these skills anymore! This quiz seems so disconnected from how we use language.”

After they had exhausted all of their questions, and released all of their frustration, the real learning began.

“According to the standards, I am a great teacher. I challenged you to complete an assignment that the standards assume you are more than capable of performing well on. Now do you see the problem? Instead of allowing my students to be my instructional guide, and the standards to be my reference, I reversed the roles, and the results were disastrous. What do you think would happen if I continue down this path?”

One student responded emphatically, “This class would be a mess!”

“Now, let’s talk about the efficacy of getting to know your students and backwards planning. Doing these things will help you employ the standards to your benefit, not your detriment.”

After that tense 30 minutes was over, I told them the story of my first year of teaching. They listened, flabbergasted. The rest of the semester still presented challenges, as the students worked to unlearn bad habits, but the work was fruitful.

**Changing the Paradigm One Semester at a Time**

Today, as I complete year two as a college professor, I am excited about the paradigm shift I am facilitating for dozens of preservice teachers. They have not abandoned the standards; they are just using them with more wisdom. The reality is that standards are not going to disappear. In fact, there are standards from NCATE/CAEP that guide my instruction in higher education. The key is to learn how to prevent them from overpowering one’s professional judgment.

I encourage us as professionals to take a more active role in how standards inform our work. We cannot afford for politicians and big business to have a louder and more influential voice than the people who are actually doing the work of education. We cannot shy away from difficult conversations about equitable education and achievement gaps because they are important. Standards do not remedy the results of underfunded public schools, food-insecure students, the growing digital divide, and other social ills that affect students’ lives in more dynamic ways than the classroom ever has. Teachers must voice this reality. We have to embrace the political in our work. We must lobby in support of initiatives that will provide a holistically healthier environment for our students to thrive in and not allow the classroom, and thus the classroom teacher, to become the sole site of blame and contention. Our students deserve better of us, and we deserve better of the public(s) we serve.
How do we start? Let’s start in the classroom by redefining ourselves as professionals and redefining the role of the standards. Let’s start at the local and state levels by working with our students and their support systems to create more dynamic and culturally relevant curricula and forcing these clandestine committees to open the ranks to real classroom teachers, with real qualitative and quantitative data on how, why, and when students learn most effectively. Let’s truly bridge the gap between the lecture hall and the classroom, to include efficacious university-community partnerships. Finally, let’s share our triumphs, large and small, to create a national clearinghouse of grassroots efforts to make a difference for our students. This work is easier written than done, but it is possible.

Works Cited

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION
Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The teacher in the article shared her conflict with making required content meaningful to students. This lesson plan from ReadWriteThink.org pairs a piece of literature from the canon with a contemporary work. After reading and discussing The Odyssey and a contemporary epic such as Running Out of Summer—a story that follows the protagonist’s journey from Atlanta to Santa Monica to attend school—students select one character from each work as the basis for a comparison-contrast graphic organizer. Then, given a handout with five hypothetical contemporary situations, students determine which of the options best suits both characters. Students must justify the specific reasoning behind their decisions through their use of exact quotations and proper documentation. As an alternative or extension, students can complete the same activities with the film O Brother, Where Art Thou? or another work from the Contemporary Epic Booklist. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/weaving-into-pairing-odyssey-1041.html