Uncommon Core: Where the Authors of the Standards Go Wrong about Instruction—and How You Can Get It Right


Reviewed by Robert M. Babirad (rmbabirad@gmail.com)

In Uncommon Core: Where the Authors of the Standards Go Wrong about Instruction—and How You Can Get It Right, the authors provide effective and convincing arguments for reinforcing the value of prereading instructional methodologies in implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Helpful strategies are offered, demonstrating the importance of prereading instruction in meeting the objectives of the CCSS in English Language Arts and Literacy.

The book begins by acknowledging the benefits of having uniform, nationwide standards, benchmarks, and expectations for student learning under the CCSS. However, the authors question the methods of implementing the CCSS, which often vary based on state or even school district. The distinction between standards and implementation is reinforced by a critique of one particular implementation approach that has been advocated by David Coleman, an instrumental author of the CCSS.

Coleman’s argument, according to the authors, is that existing pedagogical practices focus too heavily on prereading activities, which result in unproductive use of instructional time. Coleman’s model lesson for Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” is presented in the beginning chapters of the text. The CCSS objectives are satisfied under Coleman’s approach through an instructional methodology in which students are immediately immersed in an unfamiliar text, engage in close readings of that text, and are then assessed through “teacher-generated,” “text-dependent” questions (106, 38). Prereading instructional activities are essentially eliminated from the lesson.

The authors disagree with Coleman’s approach, claiming that students may not activate and transfer their existing knowledge to new texts and complex literacy tasks (185). The authors argue Coleman’s approach fails to address the potential for “sequencing” lessons, nor does it attend to the ability of students to develop literacy skills, which will transfer to tasks of greater difficulty (157).

Additionally, studying an unfamiliar text in isolation and apart from any supplemental texts or prereading instructional activities will restrict students from making connections between readings (74). The essential point made by the authors is that students must have meaningful interaction with a text, and this only occurs where students are provided with certain skills, knowledge, and literacy strategies learned prior to reading (24). Prereading activities continue to remain an essential part of any lesson, even under the CCSS. The authors also suggest that Coleman’s approach will create a learning environment that is teacher- rather than student-centered, because the teacher creates and asks questions about the text (79).

One of the most valuable aspects of this book is its incorporation of prereading pedagogical practices. Teaching methods such as “frontloading” students with knowledge prior to reading an unfamiliar text, opinionnaires, essential questions, jigsaw groups, and “floorstorming” are offered as helpful instructional strategies (47–49).
Opinionnaires require students to disagree or agree with statements related to the text (51). The authors extend this time-tested activity by suggesting that opinionnaires be applied to the same text multiple times and answered from a variety of differing perspectives (53–54). Jigsaws divide the class into small groups, each of which is assigned a specific literary perspective from which to interpret the text (e.g., gender, reader response, historical, etc.) (178–79). The jigsaw groups then break into different groups, each made up of students who have viewed the text from a different point of view (178). In floorstorming, students receive images connected with the essential question or subject of the text being considered (49). Students work in groups with the images on the floor to determine classifications and groups into which these images may be placed (49). As students engage in this activity, they work together to determine the unit’s unifying subject matter, while determining the classifications that exist between the various images (49).

Perhaps the most useful strategy offered involves “essential questions.” The key strength of an essential question is that it asks students to approach an unfamiliar text with a problem (96). Problem solving has the potential to provide students with the skills, knowledge, and strategies, which they will need, not only to meet the objectives of the CCSS but also to be able to construct meaning with an unfamiliar text and succeed on future literacy tasks of varying complexity. This approach to implementing the CCSS goes beyond teacher-dependent questions and annotated, close readings of complex texts by students. The authors successfully demonstrate that student success under the CCSS will be effectively ensured through a pedagogy emphasizing both close reading in addition to strong prereading instruction.

Uncommon Core concludes with the authors’ model lesson, which, like Coleman’s, is based upon Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter,” but their lesson incorporates robust prereading instructional activities. The model lesson reinforces the effectiveness of the authors’ suggestions and affirms that if meaningful prereading strategies were to be removed from a lesson, it would be even more difficult for students to meet the expectations of the CCSS.

A convincing argument is made in Uncommon Core for the importance of prereading instruction to provide students with the skills, knowledge, and strategies, which they will need, not only to meet the objectives of the CCSS but also to be able to construct meaning with an unfamiliar text and succeed on future literacy tasks of varying complexity. Thus the book’s greatest weakness (its avoidance of the CCSS debate) is also its greatest strength (it’s about what teachers can do well in the classroom that aligns with Common Core State Standards). I’m willing to put up with the
brass band Stuart strikes up for the standards because he also gets down to brass tacks.

The book is written in a delightfully good-humored style, born of no doubt from his popular blog, which inspired the book. Stuart explains, “Reading the CCSS without a clear understanding of the whole is akin to trying to pick up a taco without a shell” (4). I read the book cover to cover, and I appreciated Stuart’s humor. But I think the book will be most valuable as a manual teachers may consult as they choose to emphasize one standard or another.

The guide’s structure is excellent. Focusing on the 32 CCSS anchor standards for reading, writing, speaking & listening, and language—rather than on the seemingly infinite number of grade-level standards—gives the book a narrow enough breadth to be readable by busy teachers, whose time is easily overwhelmed by the full list of standards, introductions, and appendices. Stuart devotes a 3–5 page chapter to each anchor standard, so readers will get a quick understanding of what the standard means and what teachers should try to accomplish with it, as they plan standards-based lessons. The anchor standards are quite long and loaded with rich, complex concepts and phrases. Stuart uses most of the phrases in the standards as chapter subheadings, and he thoroughly explains the sub-skills and understandings embedded in the CCSS, as he sees them.

One of the book’s best features are the endings of each chapter, all titled, “Why Is This Important?” In these generally brief notes, Stuart helps teachers raise their heads above the Common Core minutia to see the big picture of how each anchor standard might be used to promote students’ well-being beyond high school. For example, for R.CCR.6 (about point of view and purpose), Stuart has this to say:

At the heart of this standard is reading between the lines and determining what forces are truly shaping a text. Although postsecondary life may not present non-English majors with many assigned novels, it will present them with plenty of “texts” profoundly shaped by their source and purpose: articles, advertisements, infomercials, websites, conversations. (46)

Educators will respect Stuart’s street cred. His breezy references to oft-taught texts (in English and world history) and his attachments of these texts to specific concepts and phrases from the standards show an excellent teacher at work. He also gives useful examples of what strong students from his classes have said in response to his lessons, but even more helpfully he gives examples from less proficient students. For example, regarding the standard for determining a central theme in a text (R.CCR.2), he points out that “a student who isn’t proficient in the skills of R.CCR.2 might say the text is mainly about the narrator’s life (too general) or about the time he built a basketball court with his grandpa (too specific)” (27).

Implied throughout the guide, but not emphasized enough, is the notion that the CCSS in the hands of an excellent teacher with the time and autonomy to plan lessons can be good tools for teaching and learning. Stuart is a model of the kind of teacher who uses his hard-earned expertise to make critical decisions about the standards that match with his philosophy (putting students’ futures first). He continuously points out that the Common Core does not dictate how teachers should teach. But he isn’t vocal enough about the need for teachers to be given the authority and the time to address the standards appropriately.

It’s important to remind readers that Stuart deliberately avoids the political debate about CCSS, so he can focus on teaching. In a footnote about computer-based testing, he explains, “I’ve purposely avoided talk of the CCSS-aligned standardized tests in this book because, frankly, the standardized testing conversation in the United States makes the Common Core conversation seem tame. . . . I’m a teacher, not a standardized test prepper, no test will ever change that” (93). Stuart ends his guide with a plea for his readers to “vow never to freak out over the next standardized test but instead to doggedly pursue long-term student flourishing” (161). I champion his sentiment, but Stuart should acknowledge that the Obama administration has linked CCSS standardized exams to teacher evaluations. It’s not “freaking out” when one has legitimate concerns about losing one’s job over untested assessments. Teaching and education are intensely political whether or not we choose to acknowledge it.

On the standards themselves, A Non-Freaked Out Guide is useful, especially on the reading and writing standards. Stuart’s work on the importance of argument is terrific—especially an eight-point
list of why argument should be central in Common Core teaching (72–73). I was a little disappointed with the lack of substantive discussion of technology, and his approach to the language standards is thinner than I’d hoped. In his general comments about technology and about Standard English, Stuart shows a refreshingly progressive attitude (just assigning students to write a blog doesn’t teach technology [94]; teaching Standard English does not mean disrespecting students’ home language [133]). But these attitudes should have fueled more robust treatments of the related Common Core State Standards. If this book goes into future editions (as I hope it will), these sections should be expanded.

A Non-Freaked Out Guide to Teaching the Common Core is a valuable read for educators, parents, and policymakers who want a practical, positive view of what the standards could be in the hands of excellent teachers with time and autonomy. To tell the complete story of the Common Core, however, it would have to better address the high-stakes, standardized assessments by which these excellent teachers’ work will be judged.

Robert Babirad is a secondary English teacher and an attorney. He is particularly interested in teaching world literature, and in innovative approaches to English language arts and literacy for English language learners. Ken Lindblom is associate dean in the School of Professional Development and director of English teacher education at Stony Brook University, and a member of the Executive Board of NCTE’s Conference on English Education. Ken has been a member of NCTE since 1989.

A Lesson in Etymology

Going back to the Latin root, the word insincere means “not not wax.” Let’s replace this double negative with the positive assertion “with wax.” The insincere have got wax in their ears. Which is why they cannot not hear unclearly. The not not wax clogs their instrument of understanding, which means just what it says—standing under. If you are sincere, or without wax, you stand under the waterfall of knowledge. The pressure of all that smart water pouring down on your head clears any lingering wax from your ears, which otherwise builds up when you stay high and dry in your own opinions. Pinions are wings, or wing tips.

They are also a way of binding and shackling. O-pinions are how we bind and shackle the wings of truth. Truth is what was already there before all of that wax started building up in the ear of clear understanding. Another word for this mess is “confusion,” or “with fusion,” which denotes the jumbling together of things that should have been left distinct and separate—like wax and ears. Etymologically speaking, all of this con-fusion could easily have been cut off at the root, if only the ancient Greeks and Romans had possessed Q-tips and a little rubbing alcohol.

—Richard Schiffman

© 2015 by Richard Schiffman

Richard Schiffman (richschiff@earthlink.net) is an environmental journalist, poet, and author of two biographies. His poems have been published in the Southern Poetry Review, the Alaska Quarterly, the New Ohio Review, the Christian Science Monitor, the New York Times, and many other publications. His forthcoming poetry collection What the Dust Doesn’t Know will be published by Salmon Press.