Common Core Literacy for ELA, History/Social Studies, and the Humanities: Strategies to Deepen Content Knowledge

Reviewed by Victoria Alessi, Great Hollow Middle School, Smithtown, New York (valessi02@smithtown.k12.ny.us)

When my seventh- and eighth-grade English language arts students repeatedly request to work in learning centers, I know I’ve hit upon a great teaching tool. Learning centers are just one of the easy-to-implement strategies presented in the book, Common Core Literacy for ELA, History/Social Studies, and the Humanities: Strategies to Deepen Content Knowledge, by Katherine S. McKnight.

This book has many useful and practical strategies for integrating the Common Core State Standards into all content area and English language arts classes. According to McKnight, “[Her] purpose in writing this book is to provide content area teachers with ideas and resources for students to develop their literacy skills while learning content. This should be an easy process—as students learn new content they should become more literate in that content area simultaneously and seamlessly—but, of course, it’s not always that straightforward” (8). McKnight does an excellent job emphasizing important literacy skills such as summarizing, developing inferences, and reflecting on the understanding of a text, and weaving them into activities that focus on content knowledge.

One of the best examples of this blending of literacy skills and content knowledge is the activity called Story Trails/History Trails, which challenges students to identify key events from a text, put the events in chronological order, and to create a visual representation of each. Students are focused on the content of the text, but also on rereading, on sequencing, on summarizing, and on visualizing what they are reading.

The book is divided into eight chapters that span such topics as speaking and listening, developing academic vocabulary, technology tools, and reading comprehension skills. Most chapters are organized as follows: an introduction to the topic, a discussion of the specific standards addressed in the activities, the connection of the standards to the learning activities, a sample lesson that highlights the activities, the learning activities, a variety of student samples, and several blank templates that are easily photocopied and/or modified to meet the specific needs of individual students. Each learning activity is rated on a scale of easy, medium, or hard, and I noticed that suggestions for scaffolding the activities were sprinkled throughout the chapters. All of the templates for the learning activities are available online and are easy to download. The publisher’s website also has videos to accompany each chapter, additional samples of student work, and more information about literature circles. An appendix discusses literature circles, and McKnight provides so much helpful information about them that it could easily have been its own chapter.

Developing Learning Centers
Although I found Chapter 2, “Deepening Reading Comprehension Skills,” and Chapter 5, “Developing Academic Vocabulary,” helpful and the strategies easy to apply with my students,
Chapter 6, “Learning Centers and Student-Centered Activities,” was my favorite. I like the idea of having a student-centered classroom with a variety of tasks, to provide students the opportunity to choose which activities to work on.

The practical way that McKnight presents learning centers allowed me to use learning centers with my seventh- and eighth-grade students several times. Each time the feedback from my students has been positive; they like having a say in their learning, the variety of the learning tasks, and the movement that is incorporated into the learning centers. The chapter starts with some tips and tricks for organizing learning centers, then moves into suggestions for different learning center stations, such as vocabulary, postcards, inquiry charts, Cornell notes, and more. I have used several of these examples with my students, and I’ve created my own centers using McKnight’s suggestions as I worked to meet the unique needs of my students. The chapter ends by connecting the learning centers to the Common Core State Standards, and with a reflection on the advantages of using centers in the classroom.

Many readers will find some of the learning activities familiar; however, McKnight’s explanations of how these activities relate to the CCSS, reading comprehension, and content knowledge is where this book shines. For all teachers, time is precious, so it’s nice to see a professional text that keeps that in mind. I liked that I could open the book and find an activity that, with some tweaking, I could use in class the next day. It is not necessary to read the entire book before putting the ideas into place in your classroom. I started with Chapter 3, jumped ahead to Chapter 6, and then went back and read the book in its entirety. I love when I can do that.

**Responding to Student Writers**
Reviewed by Andres Zamora, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo High School, San Juan, Texas (azamora6@broncs.utpa.edu)

Nancy Sommers’s *Responding to Student Writers* serves as a beautifully articulated and urgent call to action directed toward all writing teachers. The exigency Sommers stresses throughout this work is the desperate need for educators to view responding to student writing as an ongoing dialogue with students instead of a “fix it” operation. Sommers draws on her experience as a teacher and offers a well-structured text for any first-year writing or secondary teachers who wish to further their knowledge and skills for responding to student writing. The book offers many examples, strategies, and approaches to responding to student work. In an introduction and seven chapters, Sommers touches on important topics, including engaging students in a dialogue about their writing, writing marginal comments, and managing the paper load.

Sommers makes a compelling argument throughout the text that explores the vital role teacher feedback plays in a student writer’s development. Commenting on student papers is something many secondary teachers avoid because of workload, time, or an aversion to the task. Some secondary ELA teachers believe it is just a waste of time since their students probably will not even read the comments their teachers meticulously worked on. So, why bother, right? Wrong!

While Sommers admits that commenting on student work is the most time-consuming part of a writing teacher’s job, she also feels it is the most important. Sommers insists that educators view their comments through their students’ eyes to understand the immense effect they can have on their development. Sommers believes that for teacher comments to be helpful, they must be meaningful, and both the student and teacher must have a common understanding about the purpose of commenting. This point Sommers makes parallels Peter Elbow’s discussion about the creation of the teacherless
One of the greatest strengths of Sommers’s book is her appeal for teachers to take into account the significance of their comments on student papers. Taking into consideration that every classroom is different, filled with a diverse array of individual students, Sommers says, “Sometimes we need to vary our approach because we realize that a particular student or a particular assignment demands a different method” (30). Some of the many variations Sommers suggests include face-to-face conferences, recorded oral comments, and podcasts. Face-to-face conferring is a strategy that can be viewed as a shortcut that gives students and teachers a chance to hash things out in person. It also allows the student and teacher to develop a professional relationship. Recording oral comments, according to Sommers, allows teachers to reach out to every student more quickly than writing down comments, and it’s easier than scheduling face-to-face meetings with students. Podcasts allow teachers to produce a single minilesson for several students who show similar patterns in their writing.

Sommers’s book offers different approaches for secondary English teachers based on their response strategy preference, classroom set-up, and student body. This text has unlimited potential to make a difference for student writers.

Work Cited

Victoria Alessi, a National Board Certified Teacher, has been teaching English for 15 years on Long Island, New York. Andres Zamora is an English teacher at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo High School in San Juan, Texas, and a graduate student at The University of Texas–Pan American, finishing a master’s degree in rhetoric and composition.