As of summer 2015, 46 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Whether you are a supporter of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or not, they continue to be a hot topic of conversation in educational circles across the country. The new standards are not without drawbacks, but they do set the goal of establishing what students need to learn without dictating to teachers how to achieve that goal. Over the past few years, many teachers have been engaged in professional development initiatives focused on the CCSS, all in an effort to help them be properly informed and ready to implement the standards in the best possible ways. Those states adopting the CCSS are individually deciding which implementation approaches best suit the needs of both their teachers and students. As a result, educators are looking for diverse resources that offer guidance on how to address the Standards to meet the needs of all learners in K–12 classrooms.

In this issue, we look at a number of resources that offer teachers valuable information about ways to engage students in reading, writing, listening, and speaking that meet the requirements of the CCSS and have the potential to help students become more proficient learners. (VAO)

**Exploring Resources for the CCSS**

*Victoria A. Oglan, Janie Riddle Goodman, and Brennan Davis*

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**Uncommonly Good Ideas: Teaching Writing in the Common Core Era**

by Sandra Murphy and Mary Ann Smith, Teachers College Press, 2015, 155 pp., ISBN 978-0-8077-5643-0

Most teachers would argue that teaching writing is hard work and far more complex than applying a simple formula. Now, with a renewed and expanded emphasis on writing as a result of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teachers are eager to learn about ways to engage their students in the many forms and functions of writing that are at once meaningful and authentic and to help them become more proficient writers. Murphy and Smith’s book is a means to that end. It is clear that the authors see writing in both broad and deep contexts. For them, writing is not only omnipresent in our culture, but “is the big kahuna when it comes to being literate” (p. 2). As a result, teaching writing well is essential in preparing students to be college and career ready. But the authors also want teachers to embrace the idea that students who enjoy writing will do a better job of it. The book is filled with the voices of teachers of grades K–12 and college teachers of first-year writing classes who share their successful experiences with the big ideas for teaching writing.

Each of the six chapters focuses on one of the good ideas for teaching writing. Chapter 1 is a must-read for everyone since it explores writing in the age of the CCSS and outlines how teachers can continue to engage in the related professional conversation; after all, according to the authors, “teachers are essential participants in any conversation about teaching” (p. 7). It also

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outlines the uncommonly good ideas that are not necessarily new but constitute enduring practices—ones that have stood the test of time because, in addition to supporting young student authors in the classroom, these practices inhabit the writing lives of professional authors (p. 4). These same ideas are major themes that appear in the CCSS, best practice research, and effective writing classrooms across the nation: integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening; teaching writing as a process; extending the range of students’ writing and writing experiences; spiraling; scaffolding; and collaborating.

Chapter 2 is also a must-read. It offers a complete lesson designed around teaching narrative writing and illustrates tried-and-true practices for teaching writing as a process. The authors are quick to point out, however, that the lesson design is adaptable and represents one approach, since “there is no magic, perfect, all-encompassing, sure-fire way to assemble a lesson” (p. 11). Of particular interest is the way the authors engage students in what they call “starters” (p.15)—warm-up activities or ways for students to brainstorm ideas around a topic or concept. In one example of a starter, students fill out a chart with statements that prompt a variety of thinking about food: foods for special occasions, fast foods you crave, foods you make yourself, healthy foods you like. Also in this chapter are excellent ideas for using mentor texts for writing engagements, using peer response groups for revising, integrating vocabulary, and engaging English Language Learners in narrative writing. Overall, this chapter presents many ways to integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking in teaching narrative writing to students in all grade levels.

Chapter 3 focuses on information and argument writing and explores ways to extend students’ range of writing as well as their understanding of genres, strategies, and style. The authors delineate range by including a variety of writing tasks and writing conditions. The writing tasks include such elements as purpose, audience, and genres. The writing conditions include such aspects as writing over different lengths of time, writing with and without collaboration, with and without scaffolding and support, and with and without technology. The remaining chapters also deal with a single big idea and offer multiple teaching approaches to help students become more proficient writers. Further, these chapters help teachers understand how to develop a writing curriculum that is both challenging and engaging.

Teachers will find that this book includes instructional strategies, model lessons, student writing samples, and many resources that will equip them to take these ideas immediately into their classrooms as they work to implement the CCSS. Murphy and Smith point out what good teachers already know—best practices work with students at all levels. The ideas the authors present may be familiar to some, new to others, but they will help all teachers see their potential to engage in sound classroom practice that aligns with the new Standards. The authors encourage teachers to be bold, to be learners, to continue to grow in what they know about effective teaching and learning, and to “dive a little deeper during this era when writing has made a comeback. Be fearless . . . . This is the moment to build your own and your students’ capacities” (p. 139). This book will be a staple in any teacher’s professional library. (VAO)
who think of this book as a funnel will appreciate its value in transferring theories of learning into practical professional learning experiences that move easily into effective classroom practice.

In their introduction to the book, the authors speak directly to classroom teachers as they explain the genesis of the Common Core State Standards and why classroom instruction and curriculum must be improved if they are to align with identified 21st-century demands. They note that educators must explicitly help students develop complex thinking skills if those students are to become “productive problem solvers, sound decision makers, and creative innovators” (p. 3). To help classroom teachers across all grade levels and all content areas with instructional methodology and materials for teaching thinking skills, the authors have identified 21 of the most prominent complex cognitive skills within the Standards. Next, they have generalized these rigorous skills so all teachers, regardless of grade level or content area, will be able to focus instruction on specific Standards aligned to the needs of students. By approaching the cognitive demands of the Standards in this way, the authors of this book have empowered classroom teachers to “unpack the complex thinking skills inherent in the core standards” (p. 5), resulting in the strengthening of students’ thinking skills and deeper comprehension of texts.

The authors have identified seven student proficiencies embedded in the standards: 1) critical thinking, 2) creative thinking, 3) complex thinking, 4) comprehensive thinking, 5) collaborative thinking, 6) communicative thinking, and 7) cognitive transfer. Each proficiency includes three essential thinking skills for explicit teaching in any grade level or any content area. For example, critical thinking includes the explicit skills of analyzing, evaluating, and problem solving. Creative thinking includes the skills of generating, associating, and hypothesizing. The specificity of both proficiencies and thinking skills not only enhances professional learning among teachers across grade levels and content areas, but also provides a common language for teachers and students when considering cognitive skills and strategies.

Another valuable resource included in this book is the authors’ three-phase teaching model for unpacking each of the 21 thinking skills. This model, an application of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development theory, is centered on the gradual release of responsibility to the learners. Through scaffolding of learning experiences, students become independent learners who own their learning. In Phase one of the model, teachers explicitly teach a particular thinking skill. A valuable component of this phase is the use of an acronym to help students remember the steps involved in delineating the thinking skill—a strategy that the authors call the order of operations. For example, PART is the acronym to help students learn the process of analysis: Preview the whole situation; Assess similarities and differences; Reorganize by these similarities and differences; Turn the analysis into a summary or synthesis (p. 17). Phase two of the teaching model is the classroom content lesson. Phase three includes examples of the CCSS performance tasks for all three levels. In each chapter, the authors provide examples for elementary, middle, and secondary levels.

In addition, teachers will find the support documents included with this book to be quite valuable as they plan explicit classroom instruction. There are appendices of reproducibles, and lists of books and articles, technology tools, and websites. Electronic versions of the reproducibles are on the book’s accompanying website.

Bellanca, Fogarty, and Pete have provided teachers with a valuable tool for helping all students in all grade levels and content areas improve their thinking skills and deepen their comprehension of texts. This book is a practical tool teachers can use to enhance classroom instruction that develops critical thinking and problem solving, thus preparing students for the demands of college and the workforce. (JRG)
This valuable book provides a rich discussion of the issues surrounding the literacy education of English learners (ELs), complete with statistics, detailed information about the constraints ELs face in schools, and approaches for addressing these issues. At a time when the rising population of English learners in the United States demands that these topics receive more attention in schools, Olson, Scarcella, and Matuchniak do a solid job of equipping teachers with the information necessary to begin to address English learners in their classrooms, beginning in Chapter 1 with a discussion of who English learners are, what they must do to meet the demands of the CCSS, the obstacles they face as they strive to meet these demands, and the classroom support they require to achieve success. The authors also emphasize that “it is important for teachers to resist taking a deficit view of ELs, regardless of their backgrounds” while remaining sympathetic to the complexity of ELs’ situations in schools (p. 4). Although the title suggests this book has a middle and high school focus, many of the strategies and ideas offered can be adapted for upper elementary students as well.

In Chapter 2, the authors discuss a lack of research in the area of writing instruction for ELs and emphasize the importance of best practices in teaching writing, including culturally responsive teaching, understanding student motivation, strategy instruction, modeling, scaffolding, explicit instruction, and formative assessment. This chapter includes a few beginner activities for addressing each of these in the teaching of writing, and while many of these activities are useful for all students, not just ELs, some of them are dated, so readers might benefit from approaching these strategies as launching points rather than final destinations. Overall, this chapter provides good descriptions of what is meant by each of these areas of writing instruction and serves as a reminder for readers of best practices in the teaching of writing. In addition, the authors stress the importance of providing students with sufficient time to write, noting that “struggling readers and ELs, students who might benefit most from writing practice, often spend the least amount of time engaged in authentic, extended writing activities” (p. 60).

 Chapters 3, 4, and 5 each deal with a specific area of writing instruction, including narrative, informative, and argumentative writing, respectively. The authors situate each type of writing within the CCSS and demonstrating what ELs (and all students, for that matter) are expected to achieve in regards to that type of writing. This information is followed by a discussion of the benefits and challenges implicit in each type of writing for ELs. Finally, each chapter includes a complete description of each type of writing, including the elements and structures involved in them, as well as several activities and/or prompts for introducing students to these writing styles.

Overall, this is a helpful book, not just for middle and secondary level teachers but also for teachers of the upper elementary grades in all subject areas who are interested in learning about best practices for teaching writing through the lens of supporting English learners. While Olson, Scarcella, and Matuchniak connect these best practices to the CCSS, it is the best practices themselves, not the CCSS, that set the stage for the development of improved literacy skills and the achievement of success in writing. Although more discussion of effective feedback and conferencing strategies would have been helpful, I would recommend this book to teachers who could benefit from a review of best practices for teaching writing with English learners and ways to best serve and support them through challenges in the classroom. (BD)
Reference


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Russell Award Winner Announced

The 2015 winner of the NCTE David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English is Anne Haas Dyson for her book *Rewriting the Basics: Literacy Learning in Children’s Cultures* (Teachers College Press, July 2013). Of her work, the award selection committee wrote, “Dyson invites us into the social worlds of young children and classroom writing contexts where ‘writing basics’ are mediated, negotiated, challenged, and re-imagined. She entered classrooms—into the lives of children and teachers—‘where no one doubted their children’s capacity to learn, failed to instructionally attend to each and every child, or missed an opportunity to warmly welcome children’s relations into their rooms.’ An expert ethnographer and graceful storyteller, Dyson illuminates everyday classroom practices and young writers’ interactions with both complexity and clarity. As educational reforms return to reductive ‘back to basics’ approaches and scripted curricula, particularly in schools serving students of color, Dyson provides a rich, accessible account of the possibilities beyond the basics.”

Anne Haas Dyson is a professor of education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is the author of *Social Worlds of Children Learning to Write in an Urban Primary School*, *Writing Superheroes*, *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write*, and with Celia Genishi, *Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times*.

Visit http://www.ncte.org/college/awards/russell for more information.