Making the Common Core Text Exemplars Accessible to Middle Graders

Teachers and administrators across the country are digging deeply into the new Common Core State Standards (National Governors’ Association, 2010), realigning their present standards to address these rigorous new nationwide benchmarks. The standards represent a sea change for middle grade teachers in at least two ways: 1) they require that 55% of texts be informational, and 2) that disciplinary literacy be emphasized in social studies, science, mathematics, and technical subjects.

Furthermore, the Standards are clearly driving the profession toward more cross-disciplinary teaching. The Common Core Curriculum Maps: English Language Arts Grades 6–8 (Common Core, 2012), for example, contain sample thematic units that incorporate classic and contemporary literature, readings on science and social science topics, and texts related to the arts and music. Sample unit titles include Embracing Heritage (grade 6), Science or Fiction (grade 7), and Dramatically Speaking (grade 8).

While the Common Core State Standards describe the *what* of curriculum rather than the *how*, they do offer recommendations for texts that teachers might use in their classrooms. For middle grade teachers, the text exemplars include stories, drama, poetry, and informational texts for English Language Arts; History/Social Science; and Science, Mathematics, and Technical Subjects. (See Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards.)

While not required, the titles are ones the authors of the Standards consider grade-level appropriate in terms of length, topic, and difficulty level. These recommended trade books can often do what textbooks cannot: they offer depth instead of breadth and include perspectives that may be excluded from textbooks. These texts also expose students to different genres and forms, all of which are potential sources of knowledge.

While many are frequently taught classics familiar to English teachers, others are less familiar. Exemplars for grades 6–8, for example, include historical fiction titles like *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976) and poems like Frost’s *The Road Not Taken* (1920), along with less familiar texts like John Adams’s *Letter on Thomas Jefferson* (1776/2004) or Jon Katz’s *Geeks: How Two Lost Boys Rode the Internet out of Idaho* (2000).

Teacher responses to the text exemplars are often, “But these are so hard! How can our students read these books?” Carol Jago argues that these texts create an important challenge for young readers: “In our effort to provide students with readings that they can relate to, we sometimes end up teaching works that students can read on their own [instead] of teaching more worthwhile texts that they most certainly need assistance negotiating. . . . Classroom texts should pose intellectual challenges for readers and invite them to stretch and grow” (Common Core, 2012, pp. viii–ix). She correctly notes that students will need teacher assistance in negotiating these texts; in particular, they will need help in developing both the background knowledge and vocabulary expertise requisite for both text-explicit and text-implicit comprehension.
Savvy teachers recognize that nothing is more important to student comprehension of content than the knowledge they already have about a topic (Marzano, 2004). This knowledge is the foundation for all future learning, and provides “hooks” on which students can hang new learning about a topic. However, middle graders may have less well-developed schema for different topics because they have fewer experiences than adults, come from different cultures, or lack exposure to key concepts or vocabulary. Some students now entering middle school may have spent little school time on social studies or science during elementary school (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005), which could contribute to their lack of background knowledge for these areas.

The role of the teacher is not to give students background knowledge about a topic, but to engage students in intentional, purposeful reading experiences that contribute to their reservoir of knowledge. One key way to create these experiences for these challenging text exemplars is to group related texts on a topic. Grouping them thematically helps students to:

- see how information is connected,
- view information from different lenses,
- experience a variety of genres,
- develop domain knowledge critical to comprehension development (Hirsch, 2006), and
- gain repeated exposures to academic vocabulary.

The following examples illustrate how teachers can group texts in ways that scaffold student understanding of text exemplars by using more accessible texts as supports. By pairing easier texts with challenging ones, teachers stimulate curiosity, help students anticipate text content, and provide exposure to unfamiliar technical terms. These easier books can “prime the pump” for students, helping them to anticipate and mentally prepare for the content of difficult texts. These groupings can involve pairing picturebooks with text exemplars, using text sets to build background, and grouping and laddering text exemplars by difficulty.

Elizabeth Partridge’s (2002) excellent work, *This Land Was Made for You and Me: The Life and Songs of Woody Guthrie*, is a text exemplar for middle graders. From this book, students learn about how Guthrie used music to give voice to the oppressed during the Depression, and they are often surprised to learn that the familiar song in the title was not simply an anthem to America, but also a protest song. For students to understand the life and times of Woody Guthrie, they must understand the world in which he lived. They need background knowledge related to the Dust Bowl, California during the Great Depression, and the plight of those who fled Oklahoma. Teachers might begin student study of the period through a gallery walk of primary source photographs from the Partridge text; ask them to reflect on what they see in the many poignant photos. From this introduction, students can consider what life was like during this time.

The study of a group of historical fiction texts set during the Great Depression provides an excellent opportunity to build schema. Literature circles or book clubs centered around *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000), *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), *A Jar of Dreams* (Uchida, 1981), *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997), or the graphic novel *Storm in the Barn* (Phelan, 2009) let students explore the experiences of Hispanics, African Americans, Japanese Americans, and poor whites during this era. By jigsawing these titles, students can also share what they learn about social and economic issues of the time, music, government programs, and concepts like protest, strikes, and the New Deal, all of which are crucial to comprehending the Partridge text. Following the reading of the Partridge text, students can address RL standard 7.0 (compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character with an historical account of the same period) by comparing one of the historical fiction titles with the text exemplar through a multimedia presentation or an essay.

Another excellent text exemplar is the Nar-
rative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (Douglass, 1845/2001), a memoir that combines a compelling portrait of American slavery with a powerful anti-slavery argument. While today’s students are familiar with the horrors of slavery through film and other media portrayals, they may lack appreciation for how revolutionary the book was when published in 1845. Laws against teaching slaves to read and write, deeply held views about the intellectual inferiority of blacks, and beliefs that slaves were contented and happy are unfamiliar concepts to today’s students.

The picturebook Words Set Me Free: The Story of Young Frederick Douglass (Cline-Ransome & Ransome, 2012) pairs perfectly with the text exemplar, portraying the central role that literacy played in Douglass’s life. It recounts how his owner’s wife illicitly taught him to read and the dangers associated with this act. It emphasizes the power that words held for Douglass and the critical role they played in his evolution from slavery to freedom. The book ends with a cliffhanger, briefly detailing his first failed attempt to escape the South by writing a pass that would secure his passage to Baltimore. Because it follows the outlines of the text exemplar but stops at a strategic point, it will spark student curiosity about Douglass’s ultimate fate as a slave and motivate reading of the target text.

For teachers who want to expand into a unit on slavery or the Civil War, additional topic-related text exemplars in different genres include Virginia Hamilton’s haunting The People Could Fly: The Picture Book (2004), a classic retelling of an African American folktale in which slaves elude their masters by taking flight, and Ann Petry’s Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad (1955).

Russell Freedman’s Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass: An American Friendship (2012) can provide a bridge to exploration of Lincoln’s life and presidency. Another exemplar text, “O Captain! My Captain!” (1900), Walt Whitman’s plaintive metaphorical poem about the assassination of Lincoln, engages students in further study of the period through a new genre. After reading these texts, students can evaluate the texts in small groups, identify the most powerful of the texts they read, and cite evidence to support their opinions (RL 6.9: Compare and contrast texts in different forms and genres in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics).

The Common Core text exemplars include informational texts focused on often-neglected content areas like art, architecture, and technology. Careful laddering of different text exemplars can build students’ cumulative background knowledge about these topics. By starting with easy text exemplars and gradually moving to more challenging ones, teachers can scaffold student understanding of new concepts. Greenberg and Jordan’s Vincent Van Gogh: Portrait of an Artist (2001) introduces background related to painting and explores concepts related to color and form and artistic movements like Impressionism. David Macaulay’s Cathedral: The Story of Its Construction (1973), an historically accurate rendering of the building of an imaginary medieval Gothic cathedral, contributes to knowledge of architecture, design, and construction. The Building of Manhattan (Mackay, 1987) details the building of Manhattan over time, both above and underground. Taken together, these three books prepare students for reading the text exemplar A Short Walk around the Pyramids and through the World of Art (Isaacson, 1993). This sophisticated treatment of varied forms of visual art, including painting, sculpture, and architecture, emphasizes the connections between these different art forms. Students can select an artist from the book, analyze the language used to describe each one, and read additional resource materials about the artist and her style. This can culminate in the writing of an informative text that explores this artist and her work (Common Core, pp. 164–165; Standard W 8.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information throughout the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content).

The Common Core text exemplars repre-
sent a rich resource for teachers committed to creating classroom learning experiences that allow students to explore life’s essential questions through a multiplicity of texts. By effectively supporting students as they engage with these texts, teachers can ensure their successful mastery of the Common Core Standards and the development of literacy skills that will last a lifetime.

References


Partridge, E. (2002). This land was made for you and me: The life and songs of Woody Guthrie. New York, NY: Viking.


