

Watson, P.A., Johnson, H., Harkness, S. S. (2014). What's wrong with the Core? Analyzing the common concerns around disciplinary literacy and the use of expository texts. *American Reading Forum Annual Yearbook* [Online]. Vol. 34.

What's Wrong with the Core? Analyzing the Common Concerns around Disciplinary Literacy and the Use of Expository Texts

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Abstract

The Common Core State Standards call for the increased use of nonfiction texts and for an increased emphasis on the close reading of complex texts. As educators attempt to meet the demands of the new standards, they continue to struggle to meet the reading requirements across all disciplines. We assert that a new lens, one of disciplinary literacy, is required. In this paper, we examine the issues related to the increased use of expository texts. Woven throughout our definitions and analyses of the issues are threads from the discussions generated during a Problems Court session at the American Reading Forum (December, 2013).

What's Wrong with the Core? Analyzing the Common Concerns around Disciplinary Literacy and the Use of Expository Texts

The Common Core State Standards (NGO, 2010) call for public schools to increase the use of nonfiction so that by 12th grade students will be reading more informational texts than fictional literature. As a result, many schools have searched for ways to replace poetry and novels with expository texts such as essays and technical manuals. Proponents of the new standards maintain that this change toward informational texts creates reading across all subjects, not just in English class. Thus, teachers in social studies, science, and math would require more reading, allowing English teachers to focus on creative writing and literature. We embrace Smagorinsky's (2001) definition of text, which "refers to any configuration of signs that provide a potential for meaning" (p. 137), as well as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that refer to the use of an "extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new" (Introduction to ELAR Standards). However, in practice, much of the discussion has centered around the requirements for the increased reading of informational texts.

In addition, the new standards emphasize close reading of increasingly complex texts. While the CCSS define text complexity with a complicated three-part model, the focus is on getting students to read independently the range and type of texts required to be college and career ready. As states, districts, schools, teachers, and teacher educators attempt to adopt curriculum and adapt instruction to meet the requirements of the new standards, they continue to struggle with a way to meet the reading requirements across all disciplines. Literacy standards (6-12) are predicated on teachers in ELA, social studies, science, and technical subjects using their content area expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields. We assert that a new lens, one of disciplinary literacy, is required.

Over the past decade, conversation and research related to literacy in content areas have shifted from the idea of teaching cognitive strategies for making sense of text to a disciplinary approach, which is a more complex view of literacy instruction that addresses the literacy demands specific to content areas. This approach is based in the belief that deep knowledge of a discipline is best acquired by engaging in the literate habits valued and used by experts in that discipline (McConachie, Petrosky, & Resnick, 2009; Moje, 2008; Lee & Spratley, 2010). Through reading, writing, and thinking in ways common to the discipline, students deepen their knowledge and understanding of disciplinary content. Disciplinary literacy is not simply a new term for content area literacy, but embodies a new emphasis on the knowledge, skills, and cognitive tools used by experts in each discipline. Through this lens, teachers would better address the new curricular structure, as well as new expectations for planning and delivering instruction in ways that address the literacies embedded in all content areas. Disciplinary literacy deals with how knowledge is constructed in different disciplines and with how language is used to communicate knowledge. (Draper, Broomhead, Jensen, Nokes, & Siebert, 2010; Johnson & Watson, 2011; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). There remains, however, concern about

how teachers and literacy educators become more fluent at addressing the literacy requirements of disciplinary literacy. It seems that content area teachers and literacy specialists must work together to develop an understanding of which tools will be most useful for students in comprehending and constructing the texts of a discipline. Dialogue between disciplinary experts and their literacy colleagues is necessary to identify and refine these tools (Brozo, Moorman, Meyer, & Stewart, 2013; Johnson & Watson, 2011).

In this paper, we will examine the issues related to the increased use of expository texts and discuss: a) the problems of structure and organization b) the problems of definitions c) the problem of limited knowledge, and d) the problem of access. Woven throughout our definitions and analyses of the issues are threads from the discussions generated during a Problems Court session at the American Reading Forum (December, 2013). While recognizing that many elements of the Common Core State Standards hold great potential, our purpose was to organize a forum for defining and discussing problems with the Core from a consumer's point of view, the view of the practicing educator.

The Issues

A Problem of Structure

Based on a decades old industrial revolution model of education, the structure and culture of most instruction in schools today creates silos of instruction. Instruction is focused on teaching the curriculum content in isolation rather than through integration. Within the CCSS, the single K–5 section listing standards for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language across the curriculum reflects the notion that most or all of the instruction students in these grades receive comes from one teacher. Today's reality is that even in elementary grades, self-contained classrooms are no longer the norm. Departmentalization occurs as early as the primary grades, largely in an attempt to prepare students for high stakes state tests organized around isolated content areas.

In essence, the structure of the CCSS assumes integration of content. The standards are organized into two broad categories, English Language Arts and Math. In grades 6-12, the content areas of Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects are included under the umbrella of English Language Arts, albeit in a separate section. While some math literacy is included in the ELA standards under the heading of "Technical Subjects," the actual standards for mathematics are separate and apart from the ELA standards. While the literacies of the other disciplines are *completely* integrated with the ELA standards and clearly identified, the math literacies are difficult to tease out in either the ELA or Math standards, often requiring consumers of the text to read between the lines. Math remains in a separate content silo that lacks any clear literacy referencing, which questions the assumptions of the creators of the CCSS and their beliefs about content integration and the role math plays in K-12 curricular structure.

Because of this new organizational convention, issues of responsibility and accountability have arisen. Teachers, accustomed to teaching in their instructional silos, traditionally are solely responsible for the delivery of their own content. They lack

experience with the literacies of their disciplines and have rarely integrated their content with that of other disciplines. While the CCSS provide an opportunity for moving towards a new model of curricular structure and organization with potential for developing transferable, applicable skills and knowledge for learners, this new structure cannot be implemented without significant resources, time, and professional development. The structure and organization of the CCSS in juxtaposition to current organization of curriculum and instruction in our schools just does not fit.

The Problems Court Discussion

The problem of structure as discussed in the Problems Court provided insight from our colleagues on a number of different issues related to the structure and organization of the CCSS. Contributions centered on issues of responsibilities and unrealistic expectations. Several participants commented on the apparent disconnect between the CCSS and the realities of schools. A theme emerged that reoccurred throughout the discussion of all the issues of the day: *the difficulty of implementation*. Participants repeatedly acknowledged the potential for reform, but concluded that implementation of the standards was the problem. The structure of the CCSS offers opportunities for literacy specialists to provide support and professional development for disciplinary teachers in authentic contexts, but many of our literacy colleagues have had little experience with or opportunities to study literacies of the disciplines. Content teachers, based on experiences with textbooks that are too difficult for their students to read, often assert that the integration of literacy is an unrealistic demand. In our view, the important issue that literacy professionals and other educators can address is the resolution of the disjuncture between the organization of the CCSS and the organizational structures most commonly found in today's schools. The gap in the realities between the CCSS and schools makes implementation difficult, a concern that echoed the thoughts of P. David Pearson in his American Reading Forum keynote address. The CCSS are solidly grounded in theory and research, but enacting them may prove difficult (Pearson, 2013).

A Problem of Definition

A second issue discussed in the Problems Court focused on definition, which included two sub-concerns. Upon analysis of the CCSS, we found there were problems of defining complex text and the concept of task.

The problem of defining complex text. First is the definition of complex text presented by the standards. A statement in Appendix A of the CCSS (2010) asserts: One of the key requirements of the CCSS for reading is that all students must be able to comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school. By the time they complete the Core, students must be able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers (p. 2). Upon reading this statement, we wondered about the complex texts commonly found in colleges, as academic freedom allows the professoriate to use any number and type of texts they choose for knowledge construction and dissemination. Literacy experts have identified specific factors that make a text complex or challenging.

These factors include vocabulary, sentence structure, organization, cohesion, and readers' background knowledge (Fang & Pace, 2013; Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012). These experts recommend teachers examine texts used for these elements and teach students strategies for addressing them. However, the CCSS uses a more formulaic model of text complexity.

The CCSS recommends a "three-part" model for determining complexity. The parts include: 1) quantitative measures (i.e. readability), 2) qualitative measures (i.e. text friendliness), and 3) reader and task considerations (i.e. motivation, knowledge, and purpose). Two of these criteria require a human element in evaluating complexity, with the third being determined by "grade bands" of text complexity using Lexile levels (a readability measure done by computer analysis). Quite often publishers use the quantitative Lexile levels to establish levels of complexity, a method that ignores the elements of complexity most closely related to schema, prior knowledge, and strategies needed for successfully navigating texts.

In addition, the expectation delineated in the CCSS is for students to read increasingly larger percentages of informational text. The CCSS call for a 50/50 ratio of informational to literary texts in kindergarten, increasing to 70/30 by 12th grade. This 70% relates to the reading students do across the day, in all content areas and subjects. The fact that narrative or literary texts have represented a disproportionately large portion of what is read in schools, especially in the elementary grades, has long been documented by research (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke, 2010; Kamberlis, 1998). Most literacy experts would support the need for complex informational texts. Considering the literacies of the disciplines, appropriate informational texts in many forms and genres are needed. The problem once again, however, is in the implementation.

The CCSS explicitly state that literacy instruction should be a shared responsibility involving teachers from all disciplines, emphasizing the need for students to read complex texts in a variety of content areas. Yet, anyone who has had a recent conversation with a teacher or administrators, or who has read teachers' discussions on the internet, knows that the intended shared responsibility has not become practice. English teachers are expected to shift their curriculums away from the literature, which is their academic content and background, to include informational texts from other content areas. Much of the burden of the required 50-70% across the grades levels in K-12 classrooms falls to them. Upon analysis of the standards, teaching students to read complex texts, no matter the content, is defined as the job of the English and Reading teachers.

Further complicating the use of "texts" in the Common Core is the issue of the exemplar texts. Appendix B of the ELA standards presents a list of titles designed to "serve as useful guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own classrooms" (p. 2). According to the standards, these exemplars should not represent a partial or complete reading list. The lists are constructed in bands of difficulty (e.g., K-1, 2-3, 6-8) and include multiple text types (e.g., stories, read aloud titles,

nonfiction, drama, poetry). In order to show complexity, excerpts from most exemplars are included. Because publishing copyright was financially burdensome, the lists contain many decades old titles. There is little diversity or representation of global cultures. In many instances, exemplar texts for the content areas lack opportunities for application. For example, exemplars related to math include nonfiction texts about building cathedrals and about people who are mathematically illiterate. These types of texts do not expose students to current real life situations where mathematical problem solving is required. The exemplars ignore the fact that the purpose of math is to solve problems.

Despite the explicitness of the purpose stated in Appendix B, many districts and schools are interpreting the exemplars as a core list to be used for instruction. Publishers are reprinting out-of-print titles, creating sets of Common Core texts for purchase. This misinterpretation of the definition of exemplar texts limits students to readings that lack diversity and contemporary relevance.

The problem of defining “task.” A second problem associated with definition is that of tasks. The CCSS specify that students should be engaged in reading closely “to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it.” The phrase “close reading” is being interpreted in many ways and has become the guiding concept for literacy curriculum and instruction developed around the CCSS. So just what is the task of “close reading?” While the CCSS leave states, schools, and teachers a great deal of freedom in how the standards should be interpreted and addressed, the *Publishers’ Criteria* for the CCSS (Coleman & Pimentel, 2011) is very prescriptive. This document requires materials published for Common Core curriculums to include “[a] significant percentage of tasks and questions are text dependent” (p. 6).

Text dependent tasks are being defined as requiring readers to hold their prior knowledge at bay, and to attend only to what is found within the four corners of the page. While the standards themselves seem grounded in the understandings of comprehension that have emerged from cognitive research over the past 40 years (Pearson, 2013), the *Publisher’s Criteria* seem to disregard what we know about the importance of the prior knowledge and experience a reader brings to the text. The problem comes then when publishers (and therefore teachers) follow the narrowly defined “criteria” for close reading, rather than the CCSS themselves, which expect students to “actively seek [a] wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens world views” (p. 3) Again, the problem comes in the implementation.

The problems court discussion. In discussion around issues of the definitions, our colleagues noted the need for student engagement with relevant texts and tasks. Participants expressed concern that the CCSS result in instruction that is not engaging for students, especially those who are identified as most at risk. Much political and academic effort (e.g., NCLB, 2001) over the past decade focused on closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students. Relevance and engagement with

literacy is a critical element in addressing this gap, yet the CCSS do not explicitly address this critical non-cognitive element.

Continuing with the theme of relevance, one participant asked about the applicability of the CCSS for the rural populations with whom she works. Many of the students in rural schools choose not to attend college, but enter a trade school or apprenticeship. While the standards espouse the goal of college and career readiness for all students, this participant felt that the standards have little relevance to the future careers of many rural students.

The consensus from the court participants was that the problems, identified in conjunction with the definition of text and the exemplars listed in the standards, make teachers' difficult work of connecting school content to students' real worlds an even more challenging task. The idea of holding prior knowledge at bay widens the gap between school and life. Once again, the theories and intent behind the texts and tasks included in the Common Core are reasonable, but the implementation delineated by the *Publisher's Criteria* is at odds with the practices of many excellent teachers.

The Problem of Teacher Knowledge

Implementation of any educational reform, no matter how well thought out and appropriate, always necessitates changes in teachers' daily processes and practices. With changes in the standards that now provide the basis for the curriculum, many teachers find themselves required to teach content they had not previously taught, through methods they had not previously used. In 2012, the National Council of Teachers of English issued a resolution on Teacher Expertise and the Common Core State Standards. This resolution states:

The weight of research and professional expertise about the teaching of literacy compel us to assert that teacher knowledge, skills, and judgment are paramount in implementing Common Core State Standards and other state standards for student learning. The current educational landscape creates tensions for teachers who are trying to align the standards with the needs of their students, schools, and communities. (NCTE, 2012, np)

These tensions are created when changes to the standards necessitate that teachers gain both content and pedagogical knowledge. Often there is little support, little time, and few resources for making changes. Issues related to teacher knowledge and the CCSS include 1) concerns around disciplinary expertise and pedagogical knowledge, and 2) knowledge of literacy and literature, 3) knowledge of the literacy tasks specified within the CCSS document, and 4) the problem of access to the knowledge.

The problem of pedagogical and disciplinary expertise. Teachers in grades K-5 are typically generalists. Their preparation programs characteristically focus on pedagogy with little preparation in science, math technology, or social studies beyond the general education courses required of all students. Teachers in the middle and secondary grades,

on the other hand, have preparation programs heavy in courses from the content disciplines in which they are seeking licensure. These courses are usually designed for students specializing in that discipline, and do not address the pedagogical needs of education students who will deliver that content to secondary students.

The lack of content knowledge at the elementary level often limits the knowledge base of K-5 teachers who are establishing the foundation of knowledge for grade 6-12 learning. In turn, secondary teachers further limit students' knowledge base because the textbooks are often too difficult to negotiate, creating students who enter college without the background necessary to acquire disciplinary expertise. This cycle of knowledge limitation is repeated at every level—elementary, secondary, and post-secondary—across generations.

The problem of literacy and literature knowledge. A second problem under the umbrella of limited knowledge is teachers' knowledge of literacy and literature. Teacher candidates becoming content area teachers for grades 7-12 typically have one literacy course, which they often resist taking. With new texts published each year, and media center specialists on the decline, schools and teachers cannot acquire the knowledge of the range of complex texts needed for the disciplines. Given the lack of professional development related to knowledge of materials (including digital) and their usage, content teachers have difficulty creating time for text exploration and reading within content classrooms.

The problem of knowledge about literacy strategies and tasks. A third problem of knowledge is related to the literacy tasks specified by the Common Core. This included the pedagogical knowledge teacher candidates miss in their university content courses referred to above, but more specifically, the strategies and methods required by the CCSS in respect to literacy learning in the content areas. In many cases, teacher preparation programs do not recognize the need for in-depth learning of the literacies of the content areas for those becoming secondary teachers. Methods for teaching complex texts are missing for most teachers and teacher candidates.

While the idea that *disciplinary literacy* is best developed in tandem with the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge is supported by the research (Pearson, 2010), this view is not commonly found in K-12 instruction or teacher preparation curriculums. For the most part, literacy instruction remains the responsibility of the English teacher, and is largely absent from content area instruction. Teachers have often had little opportunity to develop the disciplinary literacy lens required by the Common Core. Without the methods (strategies and curriculum) for addressing text complexity and literacy learning, classroom opportunities are missed. This lack of opportunity results then in an additional problem related to teacher knowledge, the problem of access.

The problem of access to knowledge. With the requirement for complex informational texts and shrinking budgets, schools have difficulty purchasing materials that

span reading levels as expected in the CCSS. Teachers may understand the need for knowledge of complex texts and strategies for literacy learning, but need professional development to acquire the knowledge of instructional methods for teaching the reading of complex texts. Again, we encounter an issue of implementation as we are faced with the question, who is responsible for making sure teachers have access to the necessary knowledge of complex tasks and disciplinary literacy strategies?

The problems court discussion. Discussion of the problem of teacher knowledge began with the topic of pedagogical and content knowledge. One participant cautioned that we should take care in implying that teachers lack knowledge or expertise. For many teachers in content areas it is difficult to understand how the Common Core even applies. This results in a pedagogy gap. Teachers just do not know how the expectations of the standards can be implemented instructionally.

Another point addressed in the discussion was the issue of developing a common language between literacy experts and disciplinary experts. Disciplinary experts do not understand the vocabulary and terminology of literacy instruction. Conversely, literacy experts find themselves challenged by the need to learn the language and literacies specific to many disciplines.

Often then, it is a problem of translation. One example of this can be found in the definition of the word text. Those in the field of literacy commonly understand that the word text refers to many types of representation, including video and visual texts, digital texts, music, and others. Through conversations with colleagues about the texts of their disciplines, we have found that text is often interpreted as print, but once the definition is explained and expanded, these disciplinary experts can provide many rich examples of non-print texts common to their field. Teachers today need this knowledge.

Findings

Through our analysis of the CCSS documents and the rich discussion of the Problems Court, we found that the disciplinary lens through which the standards present literacy has great promise for integrated teaching, resulting in relevance and critical thinking. However, differences between the expectations of the standards and the realities of schools present problems with implementation. Some of the issues identified were

- The structure of the CCSS is problematic.
 - Accountability for literacies of the disciplines is hidden in ELA/Reading standards.
 - The content disciplines integrated in K-5 ELA Standards assume a single teacher who can integrate literacy throughout the day, resulting in a lack of disciplinary focus in younger grades
 - EC-5 teachers are typically generalists who lack deep, specific disciplinary knowledge, yet they are counted upon to lay the foundation for reading disciplinary specific informational texts in the later grades.

- The mathematics standards are separate from the disciplines embedded in the ELA standards. This results in a lack of attention to the literacies of math.
- The CCSS were developed looking to the future, but there is no clear path to attain that future.
- There is a need to move schools toward a disciplinary model of teaching. It is time to redefine “every teacher a teacher of reading” by
 - identifying the literacies of the disciplines in a way that “fits” with content classes,
 - providing job embedded professional development for all teachers, and
 - expanding and effectively using common planning time to facilitate collaboration across disciplines.

In summary, we believe that the disciplinary focus of the CCSS is a move in the right direction and that the standards have great potential as the basis for reform in the teaching of literacy, in both the English and the content area classrooms. So what is our answer to “What’s wrong with the core?” The answer lies in unrealistic assumptions about the realities of schools, in the gap of transition time for teachers to analyze the requirements of the CCSS, and in the danger that lies in the public interpretation and implementation of the document. What we need is better understanding about the document as well as a restructuring of the document itself, so that we all do believe it takes more than one type of teacher to educate a child.

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