
Standards for the English Language Arts: Stylish but Stillborn

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When the new *Standards for the English Language Arts* (NCTE/IRA, 1996) came off the press, I grabbed a copy with the excitement of a child at the state fairgrounds. I read and took copious notes. As I read and reflected on the substance or lack thereof, my state fair enthusiasm turned into something more like a child's reaction to a miniature carousel ride outside K-Mart.

After completing the book and putting the standards beside me on an old army cot while resting by the Cataloochee River in the Smoky Mountains, I imagined how helpful the standards might be for new teachers in the 21st century. Please keep in mind that the document clearly articulates why it is needed. The document declares it is necessary as the shared vision of what the nation's teacher educators (us) expect students to attain and what we can do to ensure that this vision is realized. All of you that have been in the trenches or that have visited in the schools will have schema related to the students' needs and levels of development that are presupposed by these standards. The young, inexperienced teacher that I thought about below has no such schema.

The setting is a rural South Carolina High School, Rattler's Nest High, that is located in an economically deprived and traditionally underfunded school district with 95% of the students qualifying for free lunch. Mrs. Puresen, queen of the teachers' lounge Mafia and chair of the English Language Arts Department at Rattler's Nest, is in her room introducing herself to little first-year teacher, Ms. Wren. In one

week the students will arrive, and little Ms. Wren is experiencing some degree of apprehension. Mrs. Hawk, a ten year veteran at Rattler's Nest High, is another character whose room is adjacent to Mrs. Puresen and Ms. Wren.

"Hi! I'm Mrs. Puresen, chair of English Language Arts and queen of the teachers lounge coffee Mafia here at Rattler's Nest High. Glad to have you, dearie, as part of our English Language Arts Department."

"Hello Mrs. Puresen; I'm Ms. Wren. I guess we'll be nesting next to each other this year. I'll probably be asking your advice on many different things."

"Did you get the new Standards for the English Language Arts I mailed you?" Ms. Puresen inquired.

"Surely did; I appreciate it. But I must say that I found the document less than what I had expected to see. I wonder if others experienced my disappointment."

Mrs. Puresen frowned, thought a moment, and then replied, "In what way were you disappointed dearie?"

"Well," Ms. Wren said while trying not in any way to be construed as belligerent or caustic, "I just hoped I was going to encounter the word 'instruction'. I thought the document was going to relate somehow to me and instruction, you know, good pedagogy," she said while sounding totally compliant.

Just then another teacher, Mrs. Hawk, stepped in. Mrs. Hawk had taught ten years at Rattler's Nest.

"Mrs. Hawk, meet Ms. Wren, the new teacher in our department. We're talking about the new content standards. What do you think of them?"

"You really want to know?" Mrs. Hawk smiled with raised eyebrows. "I thought something was fishy when I read them."

"What do you mean fishy?" Mrs. Puresen asked without smiling.

"Well," replied Mrs. Hawk, "the 12 standards themselves are fine. No problem! But we all salivated at the very thought of having experts show us how we enact these standards in our schools. At one point the document sounds like something written by keynoters at a Democratic political convention when they talk about the vast gulf of differences in academic resources. Then, in a complete turn-around, they sound like 1994 congressional freshmen caught up in the Contract With America when they placed the entire burden

of these standards on the learner. I thought we were going to have some genuine instructional courage revealed when the document stated 'It has commonly been assumed that bright learners come by such knowledge naturally'. But instead, this task force of thousands came forth with this stylish but stillborn weanie of a document. I too, Ms. Wren, kept looking for something that would help me, a veteran teacher, know what was expected of me. If you look at it that way, you'll come away very disappointed and empty."

"Dearie, dearie, content standards present what students should know and be able to do; that will, in turn, surely have an effect on what teachers do. But to tell the truth dearies, I was so intent on looking for the word 'phonics' and so relieved that they never used that 'f' word that I sort of lost track of the document's purpose."

"They did use the term 'letter-sound correspondence'," Ms. Wren chirped.

"Yeah, but that's as close as they came; thank God!" Mrs. Puresen said with a ring of achievement and sense of triumph in her voice.

"What in the world are nonprint texts Mrs. Puresen?" Ms. Wren asked.

"TV programs and graphics on computers I guess," Ms. Puresen replied.

"Am I nonprint text?" Ms. Wren asked.

"Sort of, I guess," mumbled Ms. Puresen.

"How does knowing that help me teach the ones getting free breakfasts?" Mrs. Hawk squawked sarcastically.

"Well, both of you do believe that students should develop competencies that will prepare them for the literacy demands they will face throughout their lives, don't you?"

"Well yeah—but—"

"And you do believe that English Language Arts are important not only as subjects but as supporting skills for learning in all other subjects; don't you?"

"Well—of course—but—"

"Well, these professionals who developed the standards believe students can best develop language competencies through meaningful activities and settings involving nonprint texts, one of which involves television shows," Ms. Puresen stated pedantically.

"You mean watching *Beavis and Butthead* can be an enlightening and revolutionary life-changing experience?" Mrs. Hawk said vituperatively while laughing heartily.

Ms. Puresen didn't crack a grin. "Well," she continued while wiping the excess bright orange lipstick from the corners of her mouth, "the standards do focus on studying the structure of narrative in film, analyzing elements such as shot selection, framing, . . ."

"Are they for real?" Mrs. Hawk asked while showing even less gaiety?

"Yes! It's here on page 38," Ms. Wren said while pointing to the book and trying to defuse an awkward and explosive situation. "We must make students more adept and perceptive when viewing television."

"Good Grief!" cried Mrs. Hawk as she walked toward the door of her room on the opposite side of the hall. "Has it come to this?"

Ms. Puresen looked contemplatively outside the school to the barren fields that once served as cotton producers for the farmers of South Carolina with the courage to try. "Thank goodness they didn't mention phonics; they didn't use the 'j' word. That's the most important thing, and they knew it. At least something good came out of this gargantuan effort. Did you read the high school vignettes dearie? Surely you received some understanding from those about what might be expected of you?" Ms. Puresen asked with a little air of annoyance at little Ms. Wren's continuing presence at her desk.

"Yes, I did read all five, and you know what Ms. Puresen?"

"What dearie?"

"In all honesty, I sort of feel better realizing that the entire focus is on learning and not on our teaching."

"Say what dearie?"

"You look carefully at them, Ms. Puresen, and you will see in vignette one that the only thing the teacher does is ask students to perform, give assignments, . . ."

"Now wait dearie; the teacher in that vignette was required to bring an obituary from a certain era." "Oh yeah, bring an obituary. But, the teacher doesn't teach anything about an obituary, just brings it."

"That's right; the students must 'discover' things."

"You know, Ms. Puresen, I looked most carefully through each vignette to see if I could catch even a glimpse of something that might be meaningful to me, a first year teacher . . ."

"And?"

"Well, it was really weird. They talked about how the students would do this, and the students would do that . . . like a presentation involving a reconstructed television newscast, reenactment of a trip to a 1950s drive-in, and a family dinner with flashbacks . . . but not one single syllable which suggested that I would do something."

"Now remember, dearie, these are content standards."

"Yes, but how do you instruct in relation to standards without even a hint of instruction?"

"Now, I'm going to ask you little Ms. Wren," Ms. Puresen said while staring directly at Ms. Wren from over her tiny bifocal glasses. "If you had served with the group developing these standards, would you have dared to suggest to us chairs, veteran teachers of America, what we should be doing?" Ms. Puresen asked with a clear sense of authority in her voice.

"Guess not," Ms. Wren peeped in an almost obvious air of sycophancy.

Mrs. Hawk, sensing the awkwardness of the moment and wanting to inject her own bitterness, stepped back in the doorway. "I looked at all five high school vignettes and took very careful notes about the role of the teacher," she said. In the first vignette, the teacher gave an assignment to fill a trunk with letters. Students, with no mention of instruction, brainstorm the kind of letters an imaginary aunt might receive."

Ms. Wren then began again with a clear indication she was only agreeing and not being aggressive. "That was it! There was not one syllable further. In fact, it was interesting to note that the word teach, teacher, instructor, or instruction did not appear."

"What are you two talking about?" Ms. Puresen annoyingly remarked while flipping to the vignettes."

"That's right! Zippo! Zilch!" said Mrs. Hawk. "Students 'become interested' in reflecting on parallels and differences. Students 'open up' many conversations about the experiences. They're always putting together multimedia presentations. I guess if there is one safe word of advice today it would be this: When in doubt, have students put together a multimedia presenta-

tion," Mrs. Hawk guffawed and Ms. Wren smiled timidly while looking to see if Ms. Puresen smiled too.

"That takes more than we have here at Rattler's Next High," Mrs. Hawk continued, "no CD-ROM, no computer workstations, no video cameras, and no multimedia software. We're lucky if we have chalk; we shared textbooks last year."

Ms. Wren, gaining some confidence now, continued. "The teacher doesn't even lead discussion; the group making the presentation leads discussion."

Mrs. Hawk then continues, "In vignette three, a teacher actually appears, steps majestically forward and joins Sharon, the student, in analyzing a paper. I really was thrilled when I saw that a teacher was even mentioned. But all hopes of having a teacher say or do something vanished on the very next line when the teacher said, 'I can see by the writing-group evaluation sheets that the group gave lots of useful revision suggestions.' Then the teacher in the vignette began intense interrogation."

"Do you know how useful the revision suggestions will be from your students?" Mrs. Hawk asked worried Ms. Wren.

"No, not really," Ms. Wren replied sheepishly.

"You'll see next week."

Mrs. Hawk, knowing that Ms. Puresen had only looked for the "f" word and had not really studied the document, then applied the coup de grace. "In vignette five, the students again do the only teaching. They wander aimlessly about in a universe without meaning trying to make sense of a silly film version of the play Hamlet. Finally, they did what all good students will do in the 21st century."

"Multimedia presentations?" Ms. Wren asked.

"You got it! Make multimedia presentations to their instruction-starved classmates," Mrs. Hawk said while prodding Ms. Puresen for a reaction.

Ms. Wren pointed to the summary statement at the end of the vignettes. "I see in the summary that we are to closely observe students."

"Otis, the town drunk on Andy of Mayberry could do that!" snapped Mrs. Hawk.

"And to make judgments about how well students are learning in relation to the standards!" boomed back Ms. Puresen.

Little Ms. Wren dared not to respond except in an agreeable manner. "I guess," she twittered, "we are to reflect on students' development and guide them when they need help."

"Guide them how?" screeched Mrs. Hawk.

"By-asking-more-guiding-questions!" Ms. Puresen replied slowly, deliberately, loudly, and with a clear air of indignation.

"God help us!" cried Mrs. Hawk as she reentered her classroom with arms upraised.

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After imaging these things, I lay and thought about Mrs. McGhee, my supernatural high school English teacher in the high East Tennessee mountains. Mrs. McGhee taught me to love reading and writing by creating an enduring romance with literature and creative writing. The romance led to much precision later, precision made palatable only by the romance (Whitehead, 1929). If I had been 30 years older and 200 pounds heavier (she was a huge woman), I would have married her. She was the epitome of what I believe a validator, inviter, and teacher should strive to be. She, the Michaelangelo of Stinking Creek, Tennessee, would take an old hillbilly ridge-runner like myself, an old rough piece of Appalachian granite, and she would chip away by building our confidence, modeling how to do an assignment, demonstrating how that literature affected her emotions, reading, explaining, showing, modeling . . . and doing it all with the friendliest of expectations. And then this sculptor, one day in May after the wild turkeys stopped gobbling and the ruffed grouse stopped mating, would reveal her finished product at high school commencement. And just like the street urchins around Michaelangelo, the other teachers who were searching for standards would ask, "How did you know he, that finished product, was in there in that old rough unshaped granite?"

Mrs. McGhee modeled to us what we needed to know. She modeled cognitive strategies and affective responses. She would cry and we would cry; she would guffaw and so would we. She understood when to release responsibility to the learner, but she knew, more importantly, when she needed to teach, to instruct.

As I read and reflected on the standards, I felt grateful indeed to have been born and reared in the sawmill camps of Appalachia—and to have been educated by someone who knew the difference between creating talent and selecting talent. I have gone through periods in my life when I worried about the lack of sophistication of my own education. I really felt better after reading these standards, the same way the comedian Jeff Foxworthy felt after worrying about the sophistication of his family and then visiting the state fair. Upon viewing the participants at the fair, Foxworthy exclaimed, "Hey! We're all right! Heck! We're O.K.! In fact, we're dearn near royalty!"

References

- NCTE/IRA (1996). *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *The aims of education and other essays*. New York: The Macmillan Company.