State and national educational institutions publish official bulletins, catalogs, and documents that contain everything from broad mission statements to specific learning goals for students. At the 1998 ARF meeting one of the problem court sessions featured a panel of literacy professionals who shared their views of different official educational documents. This article contains papers from three panelists. The first two authors critique state literacy learning objectives and the third decries the use of marketing metaphors to frame educational standards.

**Rick Erickson’s Benchmark Board Game**

Illinois has developed an official set of educational standards that students are to meet to progress through grades K-12. Statewide benchmarks for all students are the core of widespread “quality assurance” efforts for holding schools and teachers accountable for student achievement. Illinois is apparently good at writing benchmarks. Ogle (1998) reported that the Illinois standards were rated in the top four in the nation and were the only ones receiving an “A” rating in an *Education Week* survey. In addition to official standards, Illinois is developing state tests that will be used to make decisions about promotion, remediation, summer school, and retention for Illinois elementary students. However, the benchmarks and the tests are not yet aligned. Ogle (1998) reported that Eunice Greer, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) director of standards and assessment, hopes to have a system aligned in five years.

In the immediate future, it will be interesting to see how the use of mandated and fixed benchmarks with accompanying tests works out. One belief is that accountability is unattainable because statewide benchmarks ignore the real world of variance and uncertainty that exists in every classroom. To paraphrase Shrag (1998), the longest distance in the world is between a curriculum policy paper and what goes on in a child’s mind. However, this pessimistic view is not the norm, and a significant segment of Illinois school folks are taking the benchmarks seriously. Local districts are keying the 185 benchmarks to specific teaching activities. One Illinois regional office of education has created a web site (http://www.stclair.k12.il.us/makethelink/) with a matrix of the benchmarks and teaching activities.

While the school improvement movement at the state board level seeks to bolster accountability with benchmarks and matching test items, Illinois educators at the local level are concerned. Both teachers and principals say the ISBE benchmarks need to be restated in terms that students, teachers, and parents understand. Concerns about the jargon of benchmarks spurred me to develop a reading task that attempted to test the clarity of the benchmarks. Below is the plan I developed.

I drew a sample of 33 of the 185 Language Arts benchmarks, numbered them 1-33 and assembled decks of 3x5 cards. Each card had one benchmark printed on one side. I made a matrix with empty cells for the 33 cards and asked teachers and supervisors to sort the cards and write the number of the benchmark in a cell to see if they could assign a benchmark to a place on
the matrix that corresponded to three criteria: (1) Goal area (reading, reading literature, writing, listening/speaking, application); (2) sub-goal area (for example under reading are three sub areas: word analysis/vocabulary, reading strategies, comprehension); and (3) level (Illinois benchmarks are placed at five levels--early and late elementary, middle school, and early and late high school). The directions for the sorting task told the respondents to sort the 33 cards into five piles with 8 cards for Goal One, 5 for Goal Two, 7 for Goal Three, 5 for Goal Four, and 8 for Goal Five. Then they were directed to sort each pile into the sub-categories under each goal area. Finally, they were to sort the sub-category cards according to the state specified sequence from early elementary through late high school and write the number of the card in an empty cell on the board game.

**Board Game Results**

In Fall 1998, 30 teachers enrolled in two of my graduate reading courses sorted the 33 benchmarks across all five goal areas with 58% accuracy for goal area, 44% accuracy for sub goal, 33% accuracy for school level. A break down of sorting accuracy by goal and sub goal is as follows. Eight learning to read benchmarks were sorted with 53% accuracy for goal area. For sub-goal sorting, 3 word analysis and vocabulary benchmarks were sorted with 61% accuracy, 2 reading strategies benchmarks were sorted with 25% accuracy, and 3 comprehension benchmarks were sorted with 27% accuracy. Five reading literature benchmarks were sorted with 61% accuracy for goal area. For sub-goal sorting, 3 literary element benchmarks were sorted with 51% accuracy, and 2 read and interpret benchmarks were sorted with 37% accuracy. Eight write to communicate benchmarks were sorted with 61% accuracy for goal area. For sub-goal sorting, 2 spelling/grammar benchmarks and 3 composition benchmarks were both sorted with 58% accuracy. Two writing benchmarks were sorted with 38% accuracy. Five listening and speaking benchmarks were sorted with 74% accuracy for goal area. For sub-goal sorting, the 2 listening benchmarks and the 3 speaking benchmarks were sorted with 62 and 71% accuracy, respectively. Eight benchmarks for the goal area of apply and use language arts were sorted with 52% accuracy. Three sub-goals for locate, the 2 for analyze, and the 3 sub-goals for using information were sorted with 44, 44, and 30% accuracy, respectively.

The benchmark, “Locate information using a variety of resources,” was easily sorted with 100% accuracy for both goal area (apply and use) and sub-goal (locate information). Another easy benchmark was, “Apply listening skills as individuals and members of a group in a variety of settings [lectures, discussions, presentations].” It was sorted with 93% accuracy for goal (listening/speaking) and 73% accuracy for sub-goal area (listening). Likewise the benchmark, “Present brief oral reports, using language and vocabulary appropriate to the message and audience [show and tell],” was sorted with 87% accuracy for both goal and sub-goal area (speaking).

Other benchmarks were very hard to sort. For example, “Respond to literary material by making inferences, drawing conclusions and comparing it to their own experience, prior knowledge and other texts,” was only sorted with 13% accuracy for goal area (reading literature) and 7% accuracy for sub-goal (read and interpret). The benchmark, “Plan, compose, edit and revise documents that synthesize new meaning gleaned from multiple sources,” was sorted with
7% accuracy for goal area (apply and use language arts) and zero % for sub-goal area (use information).

Possible explanations

The most easily sorted benchmarks contained words that provided clear clues to which goal areas and sub goal areas they were from. The first easy benchmark said “locate information” which matches the sub goal descriptor word for word. The next two easy benchmarks contain the words “listening” and “oral” and are from listening and speaking goal areas that had no separate sub-goal categories.

The hardest benchmarks to sort were from goal areas and sub goal areas “read and interpret literature” and “comprehend and use information.” The hard-to-sort benchmark from the state matrix for the read and interpret sub goal was most often assigned to the comprehension sub goal. Another hard-to-sort benchmark from the state matrix for the sub category using information was often sorted as a writing task. The sub goal areas related to comprehension, interpretation and application of language arts appear to have the greatest overlap and redundancy.

How Many Benchmarks?

With all due respect for the need to have a comprehensive set of learning standards the volume of Illinois benchmarks is consistent with the finding that American schools have the most content requirements of any industrialized nation of the world (Daggett, 1994). Furthermore, a breakdown of the benchmarks reveals that the “go to school” nature of the American curriculum is alive and well in Illinois. There are 59 benchmarks for Goal One: Reading With Understanding; 32 for Goal Two: Reading Literature; 27 for Goal Three: Writing to Communicate; 35 for Goal Four: Listening and Speaking; and 32 for Goal Five: Apply and Use Language Arts.

About two-thirds of the benchmarks (118 or 64%) are for reading and writing and apply largely to school reading and writing achievement that prepares students to be successful in the next grade, on the next test, and at the next level of education. Only one-third of the benchmarks focus on the major language processes used outside of school where, at work and as citizens in a democracy, we read, write, speak, and listen in the home, the workplace, or society in general.

Perhaps the suspected overlap, redundancy, and jargon that made it hard for teachers to sort the benchmarks could be reduced by combining goal areas. For example, reading literature might be placed with either learning to read or with applying and using language arts. If the latter were attempted, there could be one application goal area and sub areas of literature and research.

Clarity of Benchmarks

It is true that taking the benchmarks out of the context of the original matrix made this sorting game difficult. When the benchmarks are read in the total scope and sequence of categories, it is possible to see how they are intended to mark progress across time. Nevertheless, the game provides a way to check on the clarity and meaning of benchmarks as individual items.
From this perspective one could conclude that the Listening and Speaking benchmarks, with a 74% accuracy level, were easier to sort than the others. Likewise, the Reading Literature benchmarks, with a 48% accuracy level, were the most difficult. In terms of clarity, the benchmarks with the lowest sub goal scores could indicate areas of overlap and confusion. This conclusion bears consideration when it is revealed that the four lowest sub goal scores are for very important items that are supposed to mark progress in reading strategies, comprehension, read and interpret, and using information.

That benchmarks are not clear to teachers is ironic when one reads the introductory notes in the *Illinois Learning Standards*. According to State Board of Education officials, the standards and benchmarks were developed to: “be specific enough to be used in assessing progress and improving students learning (p. vi)” and, “the standards clearly define the learning needed to reach that goal. They represent the results of schooling and thus may be considered exit standards” (ISBE, 1997, p. vii). This is clearly heavy-duty accountability language. It’s no wonder teachers and principals are concerned when unclear and overlapping benchmarks are being used to police students and hold teachers accountable. Perhaps like vague laws that are ruled unconstitutional, vague benchmarks should be ruled uneducational.

Finally, even though Illinois earned a grade of “A” for its learning standards, the results of the benchmark board game speak to problems that accompany attempts to deconstruct literacy and express it in legalized levels of pinpointed achievement. The Illinois benchmarks map the literacy puzzle in great detail. However, when the puzzle pieces were disrupted, a group of Illinois teachers had limited success putting them back together, suggesting that these literacy benchmarks need some literary reworking and we have a ways to go before we claim to have a genetic map of literacy benchmarks that teachers understand.

**References**


St. Clair County Regional Office of Education. (1999) *Make the link web site.* (http://www.stclair.k12.il.us/makethelink/)
Thomas Cloer, Jr.’s A Step Down from Sterling Standards to Vapid Vignettes

The state document titled *South Carolina English Language Arts Framework* (1996), or SCELAF, is similar to the national *Standards for the English Language Arts* (1996). Both are theoretically and professionally well-developed seminal documents that reveal oceans of differences between theory and practice in literacy development. We fly all over the galaxy with the most laudable, ingratiating standards before landing in a dung heap when showing how these become practice in the classroom vignettes.

This is not new. There has always been this gargantuan abyss between theory and practice. We simply haven't heretofore been forced to adhere to such artificial specificity as of late. We could write, research, and even teach theory without ever really being forced to follow through with concrete, explicit, unambiguous models of pedagogy developed from theory. But South Carolina has gone even further than the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. South Carolina also includes assessment with standards and, of course, the ubiquitous vignettes.

A framework, according to the South Carolina document is like a poem, a diamante.

It is a pattern, a format, a design to be completed by the schools and teachers in South Carolina who will use it as a starting point. Like a poem written by a child, it should be taken by each school or school district in the state and fashioned into a finished form appropriate to the needs of the local students and the community. (South Carolina English Language Arts Framework, 1996, p.4)

We have heard that echo, haven't we, every time a new standard has appeared anywhere. The standard will be a veritable slinky and will shift, step, roll, and slide to any beat in any community, anywhere, anytime.

One of the most interesting phenomena of recent times is the fixation on developing knowledge bases. Everything now instead of simply being titled a review of research must have a well-developed knowledge base. So, the first statement about South Carolina's Frameworks asserts that the document is a statement about what we know about teaching and learning of English language arts. I invariably, inexorably, and inescapably begin to think of what we don't know when I see these assertions about knowledge bases.

But, I must say, when I look at some of the things we have ostensibly learned in the last 40 years, I am amazed at the courage, the risk-taking attitude, the raw audacity to make such discipline-splitting statements as "learning is dynamic" or "learning never ceases" (SCELAF, 1996, p.5).

There are, however, several admirable and commendable aspects of these documents. In theory, they really are ingratiating. In the South Carolina document, the learning of language is organized into four strands which are based on the purposes and uses of language. These include: (1) using language to learn, (2) using the conventions and forms of language, (3) using language
to communicate, and (4) appreciating language. These strands are then further developed by
standards which, like the national standards, outline what students must know and be able to do.
For example, in the strand called using language to learn, one standard states that students must
synthesize information from a variety of sources. Who could disagree with that? Another strand
is titled, "Appreciating Language." This standard states that students are to demonstrate an
understanding of the aesthetics of language. Whoopie!

It is at this point, however, that the wheels begin to come off of this idealistic and futuristic
paradigm that was to save those of us in the literacy business from ourselves. So let us get to the
pragmatic and pedagogical application of these pedantic platitudes.

I hastily turned to the vignettes after soaring high with the theoretical strands and standards. I
plowed head first into the mud with the very first model for appreciating language. The standard
under appreciating language read: demonstrate an understanding of the aesthetics of language.
The first sentence in the vignette starts off well. "The class is working in the school media
center, conferring with each other, their teacher, and the school media specialist" (SCELAF, p.
35). Wow! This sounds like it is really going to be on target. My mind raced ahead. I bet they
will be reading IRA's Young Adult Choices, the Newberry Award Winners, or IRA's Favorite
Paperbacks. I wanted to run into that media center and mention this year's Newberry winner, *Out
of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997) and follow that by telling these students they would love *Shiloh*
(Naylor, 1992) and *Missing May* (Rylant, 1992), too. They all involved plots about poor people
struggling in this class-conscious country. But, then my enthusiasm waned, and I almost dropped
the ponderous pounds of standards in my hands when I incredulously read the next line. "All the
students have selected a particular word that interests them, and they are searching for uses of
their word that display the variety of its denotations and connotations" (SCELAF, p. 35). Not a
Newberry winner, not a paperback, not a favorite chapter in literature, but a single word. There is
no baptism here with life-lifting literature, no immersion, not even a sprinkling. To extend the
analogy, a damp cloth for baptism would have been an improvement. Here, the focus is on a
single word in the English vocabulary. At this rate of one word a day, considering there are 185
school days in an academic year, it will take 600,000 days, or 3,243 years to cover the English
lexicon as it now stands. And remember, the lexicon is continuously growing and expanding.

This fictitious, futuristic, far-sighted vignette goes on to describe Zach, a basketball player,
whose word was "game," not even a multisyllabic word, not a rich form class word serving as an
adjective, adverb, or participle, but the word "game." This lofty paradigm for future pedagogy
goes on to say that Zach wrote his response to this lesson as follows: "I found out that wild
animals are described as 'game' because they were hunted for sport. It makes sense, but I hadn't
thought about that before" (SCELAF, p. 35). God help us.

I turned to the other vignette that went with the strand, appreciating language, and the
standard related to students demonstrating an understanding of the aesthetics of language. Here, I
anticipated a teacher who had chosen poignant passages from *Walk Two Moons* by Creech
(1994) or *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry (1989), or *A Day No Pigs Would Die* (Peck, 1973). I
couldn't wait to see what writers the eighth grade teachers would read, or whether the teachers
themselves in the 21st century would display their personal writing to really demonstrate their
understanding of the aesthetics of language.
But, alas, this was not to be. Instead, each eighth grade student surprisingly was given a huge bag filled with cotton, and the students were expected to clean seeds and trash from the cotton. Oh, I thought. This is leading to *Roll of Thunder. Hear My Cry*, the best book ever written on racism by that wonderful African-American writer Mildred Taylor (1976). What a wonderful idea. No, this was not to be. Instead, as they picked the seeds and trash from the cotton, the teacher shows overheads of cotton gins and "a discussion ensues about why this invention was important to cotton farmers" (SCELAF, p. 36). After the students have cleaned a fair amount of cotton, they bring out notebooks and record questions, comments, or thoughts they want to save.

Now, this is a fine introduction to something, I guess, but where is the input regarding an understanding of the aesthetics of language? The kids in the vignette did not read a single word of life-lifting language from any author on any subject in any genre. Where is the teacher after shuffling and dealing overhead transparencies? "The teacher, meanwhile, is free to help individual students [as they try to teach themselves] or to circulate among peer groups as they confer" (SCELAF, p. 36).

It is not all that hard to produce and circulate babble nationally, regionally, or locally about literacy strands and standards. But, it seems it is extremely difficult to translate these into exemplary pragmatic, pedagogical models. Thus, the vignette was born into the literacy literature. This was a way to ostensibly ameliorate the effects of the standards movement, and yet provide a beacon for those lost in the fog. The vignettes have instead revealed how difficult it really seems to develop and practice the final step, classroom application. May the writer offer a caveat? I would suggest that when in doubt about what to put in a vignette, have children and youth read literature, and then write until developing tendonitis. When in doubt about what teachers should do in vignettes, how about instructing with declarative knowledge about some reading strategies, and then throwing caution to the wind and actually modeling the strategy for the students using fine pieces of literature? When in doubt about teachers' or students' roles, both should simply read and write while choosing from the plethora, constellations, or galaxies of good literature at their disposal. We certainly could do worse as these official documents so clearly demonstrate.

References


Alice Randlett’s To Market, To Market: Standards and Controlling Metaphors

If the public has to decide what the school’s mandate should be, surely citizens also have to determine whether that mandate is carried out, whether they are getting the results they want. That requires more than setting standards and holding schools accountable. Unfortunately... our conventional ways of defining success and measuring results can (and often do) undermine the principal ingredient of success, namely, a strong sense of public responsibility. (Mathews, 1996)

National Standards vs. University Standards

Because I am not strictly a teacher of teachers but rather a teacher of tutors who may or may not become teachers, I decided to examine university standards, realizing as I did so that there is no single source for such standards other than the laws and regulations codified by the state of Wisconsin. And, in fact, these are not standards in the strictly definitional form of “Exemplar(s) of measure or weight.” I thought rather to interview some of my colleagues across the university to determine where they believed standards originate and where one might find them written.

Metaphor

Before turning to my interviews with a university chancellor, social scientist and scientist, I need to introduce the concepts of metaphor and controlling metaphor. So that I might give coherence to the disparities between and among the discourses of social science, science, and administration, I used Lakoff’s (1992) general theory of metaphor as cross-domain mappings in the conceptual system. Metaphors are central to ordinary natural language, not mere literary constructs, and have cognitive reality. That is, we shape our conceptions of the world through metaphor. Metaphor allows us to understand a relatively abstract or inherently unstructured subject matter in terms of a more accessible, or at least a more highly structured subject matter. Metaphor may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies.

A controlling metaphor is one that impacts, controls, or unifies an entirety (e.g., “The Journey,” as in “love is a journey,” “the hero’s journey,” “time as journey.”). Susan Sontag, in her book, Illness as Metaphor, provides a discussion of what she sees as the controlling metaphors of capitalism in 19th and 20th century America when she writes:

Early capitalism assumes the necessity of regulated spending, saving, accounting, discipline—an economy that depends on the rational limitation of desire. TB is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of 19th century homo economicus: Consumption; wasting; squandering of vitality. Advanced capitalism requires expansion, speculation, the creation of new needs (the problem of satisfaction and dissatisfaction); buying on credit; mobility—and an economy that depends on the irrational indulgence of desire. Cancer is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of 20th century homo economicus: abnormal growth, repression of energy, that is, refusal to consume or spend. (1978, p. 63)
It seems to me that the logical next step in this progression of *homo economicus* into the 21st century extends the requirements of advanced capitalism into a new being: *homo Mercatus*: Market Man. It must be said that my interviews were not guided by this metaphor but rather the metaphor developed out of my reading and rereading of the interviews. What follows is a ragged reporting of my informants’ responses to my question: What are university standards and how do we know when we meet them? The interviewees included a university chancellor, a professor of biology, and a professor of sociology. All have considerable histories in the University of Wisconsin System; that is, all are veteran teachers in this mid-sized Midwestern university. All are male, which may or may not have influenced their choice of metaphoric language, but I find the same figures of speech in my own and female colleagues’ talk.

**Chancellor**

Chancellor G. defined standards as assessment related to accountability and stated that the regents of the state university system require accountability. The 1992 *Report of the Governor’s Task Force on University of Wisconsin Accountability Measures* recommends that accountability measures be publicized in an annual report or report card “in a highly visible manner,” and that the system should also develop other “mechanisms of communicating its performance to stockholders” (Italics mine). I was shocked by this blatantly economic term until I learned that stockholders is spell-checkerese for “stakeholders.” Either way, I see the notion of ownership in a marketable commodity, in this case education, in these terms.

The chancellor says that professional standards are not standard, that is, while some departments must be certified, others do not need professional imprimatur. For instance, NCATE is optional as is American Chemical Society certification. As well, there can be dissonance between state agencies and professional accrediting societies (e.g., NCATE and the Department of Public Instruction).

He closed the interview by remarking that this university is moving to accept SAT scores as well as ACT scores so that we don’t lose our *market share* of students who come from schools where only the SAT is given (italics mine).

**Scientist**

Professor B, a biologist, responded to my questions with a few of his own: “Who interprets the standards?” and “Who benefits from them?” He thinks that evaluation of faculty and students is based on classroom performance but the performance differs, is measured differently, and is based on differing expectations. He believes that we must start with the idea of what makes a good human being and how, as humans, we are minimally accountable. The intentional vagueness of the evaluation process causes stress and consternation to both parties—evaluator and evaluee. For example, he asked whether two scholarly publications in five years was enough?

Professor B asked about who is applying the standards? In his mind, productivity for scientists is measured differently from the social sciences and humanities though all are treated as if they make the same widgets. He also sees a decline in respect for college education. “Now
it’s simply a thing to check-off on the way to success. More students seem to say ‘Give me a product and I’ll move on and eventually earn a degree.’”

He finds that textbooks drive curriculum and provide a kind of fall-back, fact-based position for many faculty as the ultimate—and easiest—reference. He stated that interpretation, while higher level, is harder to evaluate. Also, unequal preparation during K-12 may handicap minorities and low socioeconomic students. Unequal starting preparation is particularly hard to address in the sciences despite the extensive review in introductory classes.

There is a market for underrepresented groups in faculties, too, he noted. “How can we fix this if the pool of African-American mammalogists consists of three people? The market operates here, too.” He closed by saying that having a PE coach for a high school science teacher can be handicapping, too.

Social Scientist

Professor W finds that, unlike K-12, university faculty do not have a contract that provides some standards for teachers. He sees that there are no real criteria for grading and grade inflation seems to be a real phenomenon. “We’ve fallen into the trap of associating self-concept with grades, as if we can actually give anyone self-confidence. Effort—working very hard—is not enough for an A.”

He stated that as we evaluate, it’s easy to provide effort, or how-many sorts of data; it’s much harder to provide effect, or how-much, data. The hardest thing to document is the connection between what we do and the outcomes of the process. “Can we really say what we do causes the effect?”

“When grade point is the only system for evaluating students, we’ll see a lot of subversion of that system going on. We’ve found we need subjective evaluation, too, and now we see the reinstitution of a sort of old boy network when it comes to affirmative action. We have gone from a sponsor system for mobility to a contest system and now we’re returning to the sponsor system.”

He contrasted the low degree of consensus about what constitutes knowledge in the social sciences against the high degree found in the sciences. As well, the building block approach of science education is missing in the social sciences, and this makes agreement about criteria for grading or standards difficult.

Market Metaphors

While my informants differ in their evaluation of evaluation, the consensual definition of standards, there does arise some consistency in the metaphors they use to describe their perceptions of the standards question. So, if we say that two problems are alike (e.g., grade inflation, the highly competitive market for minority mammalogists, the low productivity of sociologists, trim the fat from university budgets, market share of students), then we are saying that the solutions are also alike. That is, we can solve them by applying solutions from the marketing literature. But the market metaphor fails unless we find that customers of some
institutions are always more satisfied, all their employees more productive, and all their practices less wasteful than those of public institutions.

If we are marketers rather than stewards, who then are our customers? Students? Parents? Taxpayers? Future employers? Conceiving of education as a market place leaves out the possibility of political action and resistance on the part of students and teachers. Disgruntled customers do not customarily write letters to Congress or state legislators about poor service at K-Mart. Is not the view of “student as wallet” an impoverished one, at best? And, in giving the customer what she wants, do we give up any right to grades other than A’s?

As teachers we have a political responsibility that a market metaphor obscures. Our bureaucratic situations presuppose and imply a connection with others that the market metaphor fails to convey. I hope never see blue light specials in the humanities aisle.

References

