The authors of the new Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy believe that college and career-ready students who meet the standards in that document exhibit a number of “capacities of the literate individual.” One of these is the capacity “to understand other perspectives and cultures” through reading classic and contemporary literature. Such students “actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and writing, and they are able to communicate effectively with people from varied backgrounds” (National Governors 3–4).

We English teachers have always tried to nurture the deep understanding called for in this portrait of literate readers. We’ve helped students identify with characters’ conflicts and empathize with characters’ struggles from their point of view; we’ve encouraged our students to understand cultural and racial perspectives different from their own. Indeed, our professional standards call for us to promote this depth and breadth through critical reading:

Students’ understanding of society and its history—and their ability to recognize and appreciate difference and diversity—are expanded when they read primary texts from across a wide demographic spectrum. (NCTE and IRA 28)

Through literary reading, students learn to think about and to question their own perspectives; they learn to assume different, critical stances toward events, circumstances, and issues. (30)

By understanding and appreciating differences, students build the groundwork for unity and shared experience. (41)

My first response to this Common Core State Standard portrait of the literate student was, What’s new in this new literacy goal? Perhaps not much, you might say. In these times of obscene corporate profiteering, ugly politics, and environmental pillaging, it may not be new, but it surely seems critical to our survival as a civil, humane, global community for us to reflect a bit by asking such questions as the following:

- Is what we are doing effective?
- Are we even doing enough?
- Do our efforts affect students outside the classroom or beyond school?

Hate crimes are on the rise again, particularly those against certain racial and religious groups (“2008 Hate Crime Statistics”); political leaders and ordinary citizens now embrace with gusto the politics of anger and rage; some people issue veiled or actual threats while others carry out violent acts, as we saw in the shooting of Congresswoman Giffords and other innocent people in Tucson; and corporate control of water resources raises such threatening ethical issues as “Who will make the decisions that affect our future, and who will be excluded?” (Snitow, Kaufman, and Fox, qtd. in Lohan).

The lawful and unlawful acts of hate, violence (threatened and actual), and greed that we see today...
are destructive forces that haven’t changed from the last century; they’re just more pronounced and more common. It is not coincidental that, at the same time, we see such equally pronounced, but far less visible, constructive forces, such as compassion in the Katrina and Haiti relief efforts and human unity in the global invitation to sign the international Charter for Compassion (“Charter for Compassion”). It is a sad commentary on our times that these two forces are so out of balance, and it suggests that it is time to substantially increase our efforts to nurture otherness in the teaching of literature (including creative non-fiction) if we are to help our students become truly college and career ready, not to mention life ready.

James Martin points out in The Meaning of the 21st Century: A Vital Blueprint for Ensuring Our Future that this is the century in which “humankind finds itself on a nonsustainable course—a course that, unless it is changed, will lead to catastrophes of awesome consequence” (3). This is the century of transition from the “untenable course we are on today toward a world where we learn to control the diverse forces we are unleashing . . . [a world where] young people will be the generation that brings about this great transition” (5). If we can agree that education plays an important role in this transition, then we ought to ask of our roles as English teachers, What is a good literacy education for our times? And, how should we support it?

What Is a Good Literacy Education for Our Times?

Most people would agree that a good literacy education includes advanced skills in “reading, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing” (NCTE and IRA 1). But many have different ideas on the purpose of a good literacy education. Some, for instance, believe the purpose is that students become inspired by learning itself, thereby becoming lifelong readers and writers. Others think the goal is to succeed in the workforce (which raises the question, What does success mean?). Our professional organizations (NCTE and IRA) say the purpose is “to pursue life’s goals and to participate fully as informed, productive members of society” (25). An education for our times doesn’t exclude any of these purposes, but, if Martin is right (and I think he is), it must also include a focus on ethical responsibility, human value, and community stewardship, especially as this century, in particular, gets underway.

Students who develop knowledge of personal responsibility and the skills that go with it learn about the interconnectedness of problems and solutions, as Martin says (5), and they learn about their own interconnectedness with others. They learn to “give back” in some civic way—to their community, nation, or world, as President Obama has suggested through universal voluntary public service. People who give back learn to be mindful of and to respect alternative, often alien perspectives and values, putting understanding before judgment; they learn that the lot of others is connected with their own human destiny; and they learn to be compassionate with the struggles of other people, other cultures, other nations. They learn, as the great humanistic traditions of the past teach, the meaning that comes with being connected to something larger than themselves.

How, we might ask, do students learn personal responsibility and ethical behavior in school settings?

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They learn from all that watching and listening” (xvii; italics in original). What they see is the way we demonstrate integrity and ethical behavior in using influence and power, or how we act responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind. So how do we become more mindful, more deliberate, about enacting a literacy education for our times?

Below, I focus on three forms of knowledge that may become part of a framework for a literacy education that, although not new, is ripe for renewal: mindfulness, unity, and compassion. They not only have content (what they mean) but also skills (how they are practiced), and, as I hope to show, they are natural ways of learning and being.

**Mindfulness Helps Students Notice What Is Important**

When students practice mindfulness, they pay close attention to detail, both external and internal. For instance, they observe the physical characteristics of fictional characters as they change over time; they note the ways tone works through words in an essay to influence their understanding; or they attend to the shifting meaningfulness of precise words that convey irony in poetry. When they reflect internally, they think deeply about those things that matter to them, such as personal problems that resonate thematically in literature and those characters with whom they identify. If they learn to read like writers, they begin to write mindfully—developing character through “showing”; finding the power of words to influence others’ reading; and viewing the making of meaning in literature as part of the larger realm of the making of meaning in life. Mindful writers, in short, pay attention to things (e.g., sources of pain, challenges, nuanced feelings) they would not ordinarily notice.

A habit of mind that can be nurtured in classrooms, mindfulness can be cultivated in English and language arts classrooms by mindful teachers. The following are some ways this might happen:

- We can show students how they as readers pay attention to details (e.g., character development in fiction and the strategic semantic and spatial use of words in poetry), and they can help students to “show, not tell” as writers by incorporating concrete details and compelling images in their work (not “She was really mad” but “Her eyelids half-closed, her lips rolled in and squeezed, and her whole head started shaking”).

- We can be truly present to students. We can make special efforts to convey, daily, that we value each student—we can notice the smallest student achievement, recall what comments students have contributed to class discussions, remember students’ hobbies and interests, and listen to students, as Mary Rose O’Reilley says, “with a very precise and focused attention, listening, watching. Not being somewhere else, answering some question that hasn’t been asked” (3).

- We can notice how our colleagues in other content areas promote mindfulness, such as the science teacher who helps students observe the physical characteristics of plant growth in science classes as they record changes over time; or the math teachers, for instance, who use think-aloud protocols (talking out loud) as they examine closely mathematical data sets the ways mathematicians actually do.

Students who spend time in mindful school environments learn to become mindful individuals. They learn to pay close attention in a world that constantly forces them to do just the opposite.

**Unity Helps Students Feel Connected**

Unity means that students feel connected to their inner lives as well as to something outside themselves. Steven Glazer says they identify with the non ego: “One begins to feel a part of something rather than apart from something” (82; italics in original). Many students feel spiritually alive and more engaged in learning when they have opportunities to feel more connected to their inner selves through reflective activities such as journal
writing or solitary reflection. Others feel engaged when they connect deeply to another person (a friend, teacher, or relative) or group of people (ethnic group, club, team). While some students find connections with nature, others find them through religion, hobbies, and social-political interests, as Heather E. Bruce pointed out in her recent English Journal article, “Green(ing) English: Voices Howling in the Wilderness?”: e.g., environmental justice movements, place-based community projects, and sustainable efforts to prevent environmental degradation through wars.

All students need to feel they belong; it is natural and it can happen naturally in schools:

- We have many opportunities to promote unity through thematic teaching. Following the thinking of Parker Palmer, we can “evolve the spirituality of any discipline by teaching in ways that allow the ‘big story’ told by the discipline to intersect with the ‘little story’ of the student’s life. Doing so not only brings up personal possibilities for connectedness but also helps students learn the discipline more deeply” (9). Whether teaching texts from the civil rights movement or war literature, for instance, we can help students see how the beliefs, values, and feelings held by people in that literature are not too different from those held by most adolescents (e.g., indignation, moral justification, righteous civil action) today. We can help students see how literature portrays human dilemmas and complex interpersonal tangles as the real stuff that binds all of us as fellow human beings. Big story + little story = unity.

- We can support students’ sense of belonging if classrooms offer sacred spaces. In these spaces, daily rituals such as morning meetings, periodic councils, classroom activities such as journal writing that encourage reflection, and discussions that help students understand and value their interconnectedness with others support students’ innate need for spiritual connectedness. Feeling connected helps them learn more and learn more deeply.

- We can join or form school-based study groups that inquire into the ways school curricula—e.g., literary selections, social studies texts—and district and state standards reinforce principles of unity. We can also join or form subject area networks that examine how academic achievement is affected by students’ senses of belonging (VanDeWeghe 27).

When we help our students see their connectedness to people, cultures, values, and perspectives outside their immediate worlds, we teach respect for difference and we nurture their awareness of what it means to be a member of the classroom and school communities as well as the human community. It too is a natural way of being.

**Compassion Helps Students Become Attuned**

Through mindfulness, and, out of a sense of unity, comes compassion. Emotional compassion means entering into the feelings of another person or persons. Thus students may feel emotional compassion for someone who suffers, for a community in crisis (witness Haiti after the earthquake), or for a character in a film or novel. There is also intellectual compassion, though it is less well known and, sadly, less practiced in schools. Most students today learn bilateral ways of thinking—e.g., that there are only two sides to an argument; that certain ideological ways of thinking are privileged over others; or that alien beliefs and customs are somehow wrong or, at best, weird. But through the exercise of intellectual compassion, students learn that not everything has only two sides, that some, in fact, have many sides.

Both emotional and intellectual compassion help students become attuned to the feeling and thinking of others. Psychologist Daniel Goleman considers attunement crucial to students’ success in their social worlds:

Teamwork, open lines of communication, cooperation, listening, and speaking one’s mind—rudiments of social intelligence . . . [combine with individual] emotional competencies—being attuned to the feelings of those we deal with, being able to handle disagreements so they do not escalate, having the ability to get into flow states while doing our work. (48–49)
Students at all levels ought to have multiple opportunities to experience compassionate conduct:

- We can ask how our students will learn to understand diverse perspectives before judging them. For instance, when students are taught how to argue a point, the most common graphic aid is the straight vertical line separating one view from another: my side and the other side. The visual learning tool itself reinforces two-sided, dialectical thinking. By contrast, imagine teaching argument using a triangle, square, or pentagon, looking at a controversial issue from many perspectives. Intellectual compassion calls for just such multiplicity to take the broad perspective of understanding before arguing. It calls for students to enter into the minds and values of others, see issues from perspectives other than their own, understand the validity of other perspectives, and thereby enrich their own.
- We can support compassionate habits of mind when we introduce students to difference and alternity with an air of inquiry, such as when we invite tentatively held interpretations of poetry. (Not “What does this poem mean?” but “What might this poem be about?”)

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- We can support compassionate habits of mind when we introduce students to difference and alternity with an air of inquiry, such as when we invite tentatively held interpretations of poetry. (Not “What does this poem mean?” but “What might this poem be about?”) We can model for students to enter into the minds and values of others, see issues from perspectives other than their own, understand the validity of other perspectives, and thereby enrich their own.
- Professional study groups can be the training ground for learning about instructional practices that support emotional and intellectual compassion. In the current climate of limited funding for professional development, we can join our colleagues to learn, for example, about how exemplary discussion models built on the principles of compassion positively affect achievement and long-term learning (VanDeWeghe 137).

An Education for the Future

In Spiritual Evolution: A Scientific Defense of Faith, George Vaillant discusses “the positive emotions that bind us to other human beings . . . Love, hope, joy, forgiveness, compassion, faith, awe, and gratitude . . . [and] none of the eight are ‘all about me’” (4–5). These positive emotions “widen our tolerance, expand our moral compass, and enhance our creativity. They help us to survive in the future” (5).

Just as the standards movement of the first decade of this century significantly affected our teaching lives, so too will the new standards. But anything that purports to be relatively “new” has the added benefit of engendering new thinking, such as envisioning a good literacy education as one that prepares students not only for college and career but also for life.

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**Recital—English Class**

“It’s not such a big deal,” I say.
“C’mon, everyone has to do it.
Let’s get it over with.” But she
starts too fast and too softly
so I stop her, say “try again,”
and she looks at me, eyes
praying, *Could I please not?*
When I nod, her classmates,
who tried to beg off too, but
followed through, stay quiet,
save one who blurts “Hey we . . .”
hushed by my look. It’s less
a good thing I’ve done than
a mean one undone, egging
her on to an agony I know,
as with parenting where you
have vowed since childhood
never to speak to your child
as your father spoke to you
until one day the child’s there
and his words are there, familiar, yours.

——Michael Milburn
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