

## **The Disruptive/Transformative Potential of the Common Core State Standards**

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Educators across the country are facing the challenge of revising their curriculum to meet the demands of the Common Core State Standards. A broader, related challenge involves the changing information landscape and the necessity of preparing students with 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills. Many educators are attempting to meet this challenge by incorporating the new standards into existing programs and practices. However, we would argue that the Common Core State Standards coupled with the necessity to develop 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills represent an opportunity to disrupt and transform existing instructional practices and ways of thinking about curriculum.

We have come to understand the critical and creative thinking required by the Common Core State Standards more profoundly through our own teaching in our integrated first year university courses. Composition and First Year Seminar (FYS) are both required by our university's general education program. Typically these courses are taught independently. According to the university catalog, first year seminar focuses on introducing students to "critical thinking skills and basic tools of gathering and evaluating information" (Plymouth State University Academic Catalog, 2011, p. 63). Composition centers on "the importance of reading and writing for inquiry, learning, thinking and communication" (PSUAC, 2011, p. 224). Despite the similarities in these descriptions, composition is generally thought of as a "writing course" and First Year Seminar is thought of as a "critical thinking course." We have taught these classes as linked courses for the past three years, and have come to conceive of both courses as "critical thinking courses" with composition focusing on thinking through writing, and first year seminar focusing on thinking through reading.

Every first year seminar explores a particular question chosen by the instructor. Our course question is, “What is race and how does it matter?” The course design is not dependent upon any particular question; however, the question must be open, complex, multidimensional and capable of being addressed in various ways, requiring more than a few texts to begin to explore it thoroughly.

In this linked course, students must enroll in both classes which meet for two consecutive blocks. As instructors, we each attend both courses and plan together. Throughout the semester, we often share readings, explore related themes, and use parallel assignments. While early in the semester, the course sessions are taught separately, by the end of the semester the lines between the classes blur as students are engaged in an inquiry project in first year seminar, which culminates in a paper written in composition.

The challenge of teaching this linked course forced us to disrupt our existing practices, to rethink the relationship between content and process. Through our work with the National Writing Project, we had grown to view writing as a way of thinking and learning. Yet our experience in teaching these classes pushed and deepened that understanding. Meg came to this experience after having taught composition as an isolated course for twenty years. Joining the course with First Year Seminar required reconsideration of the writing assignments to coordinate with the focus question of the seminar. She had to think about how the writing they would do in composition could support and extend the students’ thinking in different ways. While Megan had not taught First Year Seminar, she had used writing as a way to respond to readings. These reading responses started and ended with a singular text. She had not considered how this writing could connect across texts over the duration of the course. This joint teaching experience helped us to explore more deeply the relationship between reading, writing, thinking and content.

The model we devised integrated multiple disciplinary perspectives. It also expanded our definitions and use of text to include not only fictional and informational text, but also non-print works such as art, film, media, and artifacts of popular culture, as well as student work and other nontraditional texts. This allowed us to move away from a focus on content and information gathering to a focus on critical and creative thinking and a process of creating meaning from and through texts, both the texts we create (write) and the texts we read. Our focus shifted from helping students to comprehend particular texts as content, and practicing writing as technique, to helping students to use text as a way of shaping ideas and understanding the world.

A third transformation involved the role of personal stories, or narratives. We came to this class valuing students' personal stories, but we hadn't fully considered how to use them to support content learning. The connection we make between personal stories and content is conceptual rather than literal. We do not ask students to relate their personal writing directly to the course question. Instead, we ask students to consider their own writing and experiences as cultural artifacts and to situate their narratives within time, social history, relations of power, and social institutions in order to practice these disciplinary ways of thinking. For example, students write narrative about their own experiences and then examine through class discussions how social institutions have shaped those experiences, as well as how personal and cultural meanings are related. This approach allows us to honor and respect students' stories and their lives while at the same time pushing them to think more critically. Thus we avoid both the traps of unconditional celebration or political exploitation. While stories remain personal, they are not merely individual.

The Common Core State Standards and 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills were not at the forefront of our minds as we were designing the integrated course. However, when we immersed ourselves in

thinking about these standards and skills, we recognized how our work could be a model for the kind of curricular redesign and rethinking required in order to realize the full transformative potential of the Common Core.

We organized the class around four “directions”: self and society, past and present, scientific inquiry and creative thought. These directions correspond to our university’s general education program. They could be thought of as disciplinary ways of thinking or modes of inquiry. These directions represent, in the words of the university catalog: “ways of considering and understanding human experience” (PSUAC, 2011, p. 64) or “four different approaches to learning” (PSUAC, 2011, p. 64). These directions, while somewhat discipline-based, are different from “interdisciplinary” units of study in that they are fully integrated in our course. We use these directions in two ways: to structure the early part of the course and to help students to expand their thinking about their inquiry question. The larger purpose, in both cases, is to help students develop their ability to analyze and compose ideas.

For each direction, we gather relevant texts related to the course question, and design writing assignments which ask students to apply these perspectives to their own lives and to cultural artifacts. For example, when considering the past and present directions, students read historian Ira Berlin’s article “The Changing Definition of African-American” (2010) and watch an episode from the series *Race, the Power of an Illusion* (Adelman, Herbes-Sommers, Strain, Smith, and Cheng, 2003) about how past government policies have connected whiteness and citizenship. At the same time, students write about how a past incident in their lives has influenced another event in their present lives. We use this text as a jumping off point for the consideration of past and present narratives of race.

We ask them to respond to text by attending to and describing the literal, personal, cultural meanings they have understood through the text. In addition, we ask them to consider the text as a reader, writer, and thinker through noticing how the text is constructed and the effects of particular elements of craft, and how all of this contributes to their evolving understanding of the course content and of themselves as learners. In response to Tim Wise's *White Like Me*, students have connected personally by examining their own family history, culturally by naming examples of privilege they had not previously been aware of and as thinkers by connecting it back to previous readings, such as Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1990).

We have decentered the text as the focus of curriculum. Students do not read the text to extract knowledge from it, but rather to use it as a lens or tool for considering a larger, deeper question. For example, students read an article by Jonathan Kozol (2005) about inequalities in schools, not so much to remember the specifics of segregation in particular districts, but rather to begin to think about how social institutions construct and preserve inequalities. While we use literary texts such as *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1994) and *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991) as well as film, artwork and even student texts, our purpose is not only aesthetic appreciation. We use these texts to expand our imagination and consider how creative thought helps us to know content differently.

The challenge of these courses is that they are skills-based, focusing on reading, writing and thinking while at the same time centering around a course question, which represents particular content. There are few models available of how to do this well. The temptation is to either allow the skills to be the focus with the content as an afterthought, or to focus on the topic as content without fully developing skills. This challenge has enabled us to consider how to build

content through skills and skills through content. Students learn analytical and inquiry strategies through writing about artwork related to the course question. So while they are learning the skills, they are also exploring content in their investigation of the context and background of a particular artistic work. So a student analyzing Aaron Douglas's *Into Bondage* (1936) might need to investigate the slave trade as well the artist's background.

Our conception of literacy across the curriculum has been transformed through this process. We no longer think about how to integrate reading and writing into particular subject areas. Instead, we have come to see literacy across the curriculum as a series of intellectual moves rooted in disciplinary lenses. These intellectual moves require students to not only read and write about the content, but to consider how reading and writing function within particular content areas. For example, when students read Stephen J. Gould's chapter "Measuring Heads" from *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981), they write to process their understanding of the argument of the text. They also do two other things. They consider how scientific knowledge is composed and valued within a context of prevailing cultural assumptions. At the same time, they are asked to compose a narrative of their own experience from someone else's perspective in order to explore how perspective and world view shape and affect our understanding of reality. Similarly, we read *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1994) following an analogous thinking process. The students write to explore their understandings of the plot, character and theme. We ask them to look at how the composition of the work affects all of these elements. We explore creative thought through an examination of narrative structure and language, and consider how the structure and language help create meaning. Students are then asked to experiment with these elements in their own writing.

All of this work has given us a new perspective on integration of the Common Core State Standards. While it might be tempting to overlay the Common Core standards onto current practice or to resist them completely, our work demonstrates the opportunity and possibility inherent in the standards. In order to realize the transformative potential of these standards, we need to attend not so much to the specifics of each standard, as to the overall spirit of intellectual inquiry which they describe. This approach requires significant disruption of existing practices.

Our practice was disrupted most by the challenge of our inquiry project assignment. For Meg, much of this disruption came in the initial design of the course. The common focus of topics provided new challenges and opportunities. Before these classes were combined, the inquiry project looked more like a traditional research paper in that students selected their own unrelated topics and much of the focus of instruction was on the gathering of information. She had to rethink what she was actually teaching through the inquiry project and reframe it with a focus on thinking through and across text to create meaning. For Megan, the changes came in her thinking about the role of writing in the research process after teaching the integrated course for the first time. In the first year, she asked the students to reflect on their research process and thinking after gathering their sources, but before writing their inquiry paper. She came to realize that writing the paper was an essential part of the thinking and meaning-making process and, after writing, students' reflections changed dramatically.

Through the inquiry paper, students are also asked to disrupt their established patterns of thinking in relation to their topic. We begin with the development of a question related to the larger course question. Usually, these questions connect the course focus to a student's personal interest or background. For example, a student pursuing a career in criminal justice focused his inquiry on racial profiling. Then students compose an essay, based on Carol Booth Olson's

“personalized research paper” (2003), in which they think about what they know, what they believe to be true, and what they imagine to be true about their inquiry question. Students are thus forced to foreground their own stance and assumptions about a particular topic. This student work provides the base for subsequent research. As they gather their sources, they write annotations, which, like their earlier reading responses, explore the literal, personal and racialized meanings in relation to their inquiry question. They also note how these sources are composed. For example, what kinds of evidence are used and how compelling they find that evidence. At this stage in the process, students conduct an interview with an expert on their topic, thus creating their own knowledge through original research.

As students prepare to write their paper, we group them by thematic territories such as race and popular culture, race and sports, race and history, or race and identity. Students meet in these groups to discuss their investigations and prepare a symposium in which they talk publically about their emerging ideas and take and pose questions for their audience. This talk is not a formal presentation but a working session to discuss ideas in progress. Since all of the students’ inquiry topics relate to the larger course question, they are not only able to enter into a common conversation about their topics, but through interaction, they are able to see other aspects of their own inquiry and expand their understanding of the field within which their research is located. In this way, they become part of a genuine scholarly community in which they share common language, refer to common knowledge gained through course readings, and are able to place their topics and others within a field of study.

At this point students begin to organize their sources and write their paper, a process which requires them to synthesize all that they know about their topic and to arrive at a central meaning which answers and often extends their initial inquiry question. If we think of inquiry as

a metaphorical conversation with sources of knowledge, be they original, personal, or scholarly, students need a basic background in order to enter that conversation. The common focus of their research questions, along with the shared foundational readings we do in the beginning of the course, provide that entry point for the research.

All of this shifts the role of the instructor from authority to thinking partner and guide. Much of writing instruction tends to be technical, apolitical, and acontextual. Students are taught techniques for better ways to say things such as effective introductions or how to integrate sources, without consideration of what they are saying or the implications of their arguments. Reading instruction tends to be isolated and content-focused. Teachers focus on extracting meaning from text without connecting that meaning to other texts or students' thinking in any sustained and generative way that builds upon or challenges students' ideas or perspectives.

Due to our shared participation in each other's courses, we become cultural members and thinking partners, and thus can challenge ideas in a way which does not impose an intellectual authority. This is not to imply that we are atheoretical, apolitical, or neutral in our guidance, but that our position allows us to support and guide the students' thinking rather than invoke textual or role-based authority. In contrast, the transparency of this move allows us to make visible our thinking, the students' thinking and how we can relate that thinking to outside sources. This approach enables us to be more genuine. We do not need to fake neutrality, but neither do we impose outside intellectual authority.

As our profession has moved in the "information age" from a concept of the teacher as authority based in knowledge and information, to one of facilitator or guide, we have struggled to define our roles and our relationship to students and their thinking. While we reject the imposition of authority based on superior knowledge, we are also concerned about how our roles

as facilitators can fail to create genuine scholarly community. While some facilitators do create a community based on personal relationships or technical skills, they fail to situate that community in a broader social or scholarly context.

The Common Core, with its emphasis on thinking, argument and the construction of knowledge, challenges us to go beyond facilitation to become authentic thinking partners with our students. We must use our knowledge and experience in the content not as authorities, but as intellectual partners who have a wider vision of the topic of investigation, and thus we are able to pose provocative probing questions or to signal students as to what might be omitted from their thinking and help them to consider how they might be looking at a topic too narrowly or only partially. Similarly, we must use technical expertise, not as an end in itself, but to support students as they work to make sense of content and to situate that content in a wider social and intellectual context, as well as to transfer those skills to future investigations. The advent of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills and the Common Core State Standards has the potential to disrupt not only our curriculum, but our conceptions of our roles as educators.

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