

WHITHER THE ARTS IN AN ERA OF COMMON CORE?

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In practically all of the discussions by policy makers about Common Core, the role of the arts is hardly ever addressed. This is ironic given the fact that our society, indeed the world, is becoming more and more arts infused due to the effects of the Internet – a visual and aural *artistic* medium. Does this mean that the arts face an existential threat from this new paradigm for teaching and learning? Perhaps, but not if educators realize what the true foundational principles of Common Core are and how the arts can contribute towards the learning of those principles, those “habits of mind,” required for student success. To understand the role the arts can play, I first have to explain the way in which I came up with why the arts can help educators propitiously address the expectations required by Common Core.

As anyone who is familiar with the structure of the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts (ELA) knows, all grade level standards are variations of the anchor standards and the anchor standards derive from about a half dozen cognitive strategies. But they all share certain cognitive concepts in common and it is these concepts collectively that define the matrix of Common Core. What are they?

Three years ago when I realized that Common Core was going to become the common currency for education in this country, I wondered, “What was David Coleman (the prime mover behind Common Core) thinking? What did he want kids to do and do to what?” So, I downloaded the first page of the Anchor Standards for Reading. I thought, “What does

David want kids to *do?*” Why, that would be the verbs wouldn’t it? “And do to what?” The nouns, of course. So I highlighted each of the verbs in one color, the nouns in another, and the modifiers in yet a third. Having done that I noticed that certain terms popped up more than once on that page. For instance, “analyze” is referenced in five of the ten anchor standards in reading.

Hmmm, I wondered how many times certain terms are embedded in all fifty-six pages of the ELA standards? Here is what I found:

HIGH PRIORITY VERBS

Analyze (146)

Support (140)

Develop (116)

Determine (89)

Demonstrate (86)

Draw (out) (65)

HIGH PRIORITY NOUNS

Text (561)

Central/Main Idea (188)

Evidence (121)

Details (101)

Structure (64)

Context (58)

SECONDARY VERBS

Explain (43)

Evaluate (40)

Identify (38)

Comprehend (38)

Contrast (35)

Compare (31)

SECONDARY NOUNS

Story (46)

Argument (43)

Theme (39)

Narrative (29)

Point of View (28)

Tone (25)

THIRD LEVEL VERBS

THIRD LEVEL NOUNS

Describe (34)	Explicit (27)
Distinguish (30)	Figurative Language (24)
Refer (29)	Reference (29)
Recognize (28)	Conclusion (22)
Integrate (27)	Connections (20)
Assess (27)	Connotative Language (24)
Infer (22)	
Interact (24)	

Wow! That little term “analyze” popped up 146 times in only 56 pages? Must be a pretty important *concept* embodied by that word, don’t you think? Further, doesn’t it stand to reason that any standardized test based on Common Core would also attempt to assess how well students have developed the skill of analysis?

At the time, I was working with about one hundred students attending a high school on the south side of Chicago and I wondered, “How many of these terms do my kids understand?” So I gave each of them a little qualitative pre-assessment by asking them to define some of these terms in their own words; I wanted to understand what they understood. Here’s what I found:

Analyze (15%)	Develop (16%)
Integrate (27%)	Theme (71%)
Structure (19%)	Explicit (8%)
Interpret (15%)	Figurative Language (19%)
Evaluate (7%)	Revise (39%)

Assess (5%)	Inference (25%)
Determine (8%)	Adapt (16%)
Narrative (19%)	Connotative (0%)
Metaphor (32%)	Sensory Language (8%)

Not very encouraging is it? I have found results consistent in other cities as well, in middle and elementary levels as well as high school. If you are a classroom teacher, why don't you ask your students to define the first two levels of terms listed above and see what you get? Come to think of it, what about teachers' understanding of these terms/concepts? In one of the workshops I conducted on Common Core through the arts, I asked about eighty teachers (in another city) to define only ten of them. Here's what I found:

ANALYZE 53%
INFER 53%
INTERPRET 50%
MAIN IDEA 28%
THEME 28%
EXPLICIT 25%
ORGANIZE 53%
SUMMARIZE 32%
CONCLUSION 39%
METAPHOR 10%

It should be a revelation of the obvious if teachers don't understand these terms, how can they teach the cognitive processes they represent? Why is this so important? Because the

Common Core State Standards are not focused on content (i.e. text), they are focused on what to do with the content (i.e. think about). According to advocates for Common Core, this new framework isn't about rote recall - it's about thinking.

Perhaps you might assume that these concepts are only limited to English Language Arts?

Well, take a look:

(# OF PAGES)	56	95	93
TERM	ELA	SCIENCE	MATH
	Standards	Standards	Standards
ANALYZE	146	111	35
SUPPORT	140	126	3
INTERPRET	17	65	106
EVALUATE	40	32	22
DETERMINE	89	54	32
DEVELOP	116	229	56
EXPLAIN	43	57	63
COMPARE	31	22	58
IDENTIFY	38	28	34
DESCRIBE	34	61	89

It seems to me that if a student cannot define, let alone understand, these concepts they will be handicapped when faced with questions based on them. What is the difference between “interpret” and “infer,” or “determine” and “distinguish” for example? Does “support” really mean to “hold up” in the Common Core context, and what does “context”

mean anyhow? This allows me the opportunity to address a salient issue regarding assessments such as the PARCC and Smarter Balanced. These two consortia are formulating their respective assessments based on the standards, not on curriculum because each educational authority devises their own. However, school districts also determine the specific content for their respective curricula. By definition then, these assessments cannot be aligned to curricular content, only to standards. In a way, it's like bowling behind a curtain because educators don't know what content will be in the assessments. So, it is probably a somewhat futile effort to try and divine what content is going to show up on test day by looking at the samples on various websites.

Given this fact, why not teach kids to apply these thought processes to *any* content, which would not be limited to texts, but would include visual images, songs, films, video games, equations, graphs, historical events, evolutionary trends, current events, formulas, etc.? Which brings me, finally, around to the arts. All these terms are ARTS TERMS! Can't students analyze a work of art, evaluate a work of art, interpret a work of art, infer certain things from a work of art, support claims made about a work of art and so on? Any art form will do whether it is music, visual art, theatre, dance, or media art. As a matter of fact, just replace the word "text" with "work of art" in almost any standard. With regard to the three major divisions of the ELA standards, you can substitute "study" for "read," "create" for "write," "presenting" or "performing" for "speaking" and "be an audience for" instead of "listening."

This is my primary goal in working with arts specialists – to demonstrate how they can

contribute to overall student achievement within the Common Core framework. But let's not stop there. Replace "text" with "content" and the same approach applies. Any teacher in any subject area can reorient their practice to focus truly on the thinking (e.g. analyze, evaluate, interpret, infer, determine, explain, etc.) as opposed to having the thinking part result as a byproduct from an overriding emphasis on content delivery. This former mindset is a holdover from the time when content recall was imperative given the limited resources for easy access to relevant information. But today we have the Internet – instant access to unlimited content at any time, on any subject, from practically any place on the planet. In the coming decade, descendants of today's "chatbots," educational avatars if you will, will probably take over the task of simple instruction – access, delivery and retention of content – thereby requiring human teachers to focus mainly on authentic thinking skills. By the way, those Common Core verbs could also represent skills, the nouns relate to products, and modifiers indicative of the level of rigor.

Let's reflect on our primary mission as educators – to enable students to grow up as capable adults. To do so, they must be competent with the processes, the habits of mind implied by these words. All of what I would call "key terms" contained in Common Core are "Tier II" words – high frequency vocabulary that is used across domains and is essential for mature users of language. Given the reality that many inner-city kids in particular come to school with a vocabulary deficit, isn't all the more crucial for them to effectively employ these concepts (i.e. words) in meaningful ways?

I began this article by implying that the arts could make some unique contribution within

the Common Core. Not really. We continually apply the terms “gifted” and “talented” to those kids who aspire to the arts. Becoming an artist is really a matter of time, resources, and desire. Talent is not a zero sum proposition, but a matter of degree. But from the Greeks on, the arts have been seen throughout history as integral to a balanced education rather than sidelined into pedagogy for the predisposed or self-selected. Consequently, we need to change the perception that the arts are only for “Glee Wannabes” or to provide prep time for the classroom teacher.

I maintain that the terms I have articulated here are inherent in our being human and can be expressed productively in any content area, but particularly in the arts when they are combined with the arts’ seminal ingredients of emotion and meaning. If educators in “core” subjects and those who teach in artistic venues can share in conveying these commonalities, they not only enhance the educational process overall, but contribute to students’ capacity to achieve success in an increasingly complex, conceptual, and, yes, *artistic* world.