

Teaching the Common Core as a Subversive Activity

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Responses to the imposition of the Common Core have ranged from acceptance and embrace of the standards to complete rejection of them. Some who accept the standards view them as a new way to do what they have always done and are busily mapping and aligning the new standards to curriculum. Others recognize the changes inherent in the standards and attend to their technical aspects, such as text complexity or rigor. Others have responded critically. This critical resistance has questioned and challenged the legitimacy of the standards, the process of their creation, their forced implementation, and the upcoming, yet to be implemented, assessments.

We respect both the intellectual work of those who are discussing rigor and text selection, as well as the political orientation of many who resist these standards. The intellectual work of devising techniques for close reading, developing argument etc. is important and necessary. Similarly, the questions raised about standards development, implementation and assessment cannot be ignored. Those who are mapping or attending to the technical challenges are not offering a critical perspective. Those who are resisting are not offering ideas for practice. What is missing is a democratic and equitable vision of how to address the shifts inherent in these standards in our teaching.

The question we as critical educators always face is “How can we remake teaching and learning in more humane and just ways?” This is our obligation and purpose. When confronted with any new initiative, we must think about it in those terms. We recognize and respect that for some critical educators, the answer to this question is to resist the standards entirely. However, such a stance offers little guidance to those who must respond to these standards daily in their classrooms. Simply resisting the standards also denies us the opportunity to influence how they are implemented. We wish to offer an alternative which involves a more critical perspective, a resistance in practice.

Classroom teachers and administrators on the proverbial “Monday morning” whether resistant or accepting, must take the standards into account. The binary positions outlined above do not allow for a resistance in practice. We do have choices within what is imposed on us. As the title of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner’s original 1971 book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, would indicate, it is possible to resist through our practice. We are often forced to work within structures we do not endorse and have not created. As Michael Fullan notes, “You may be stuck with the policy, but you are not stuck with the mindset.”

We see more in the Common Core than “making the best of the situation.” We have referred in another article to the disruptive transformative potential of the Common Core. Apart from valid concerns about the process of their creation and imposition, the standards themselves hold potential to shift teachers’ thinking and practice, decentering content, focusing on critical and creative thinking skills and creating interdisciplinary connections. As Schmidt and McKnight (2012) point out, the math standards even have the potential to promote greater access and equity for all students. All of these shifts create an opportunity and a space to place inquiry and equity at the center of curriculum. The

focus on argument encourages teachers and students to examine evidence and construct meaning about critical content.

In our minds, this potential for transformative curriculum outweighs our inclination to completely resist the standards. The standards can provide a wedge to force discussion of issues such as tracking, school funding, race and social class, disability, environmental and LGBTQ concerns. The standards can be used to help us to problematize and deepen understanding of the socio-political implication of all content taught in schools. This wedge is pragmatic in the way Patricia Hill Collins uses the term “visionary pragmatism.” The pragmatic part encourages us to use the standards as a wedge, but the visionary part is still about humane, just, and equitable teaching and learning. Thus, enacting our vision of the standards is also an act of subversion.

Subversive Curriculum Planning and the Common Core

To begin to plan subversively with the Common Core, we need to recognize some openings and the potential that these standards offer us. In terms of curriculum planning, we see at least three elements that offer possibilities for critical engagement and curricular transformation. These are: the decentering of content, the expanded definition of text, and the attention to argument.

Other than a reference to “a Shakespeare play”, the Common Core English Language Arts Standards do not require any particular content. Instead, what is being emphasized are deep thinking skills and students’ ability to think through and with text. The standards emphasize student knowledge creation through reading, writing, speaking and listening. This offers critical educators the opportunity to select texts, frame units, and support inquiry that recognizes socio-political context.

The Common Core also allows for an expanded definition of text, to include not only fiction, non-fiction, informational and argumentative print text, but also visual, cultural, and film texts and artifacts. While the standards only specifically mention the print text, the expansion beyond traditional text boundaries opens the possibility of further expansion to encompass new literacies and the many texts students read and write in their lives.

Perhaps most significant is the emphasis in the standards on argument. A focus on arguable claims, supported by evidence, creates a place for a view of curriculum and content through which students and teachers can problematize and make sense of their worlds. As George Hillocks notes, “Units of instruction nearly always benefit by problematizing the concepts with which they deal. Love, for example, is often chosen as the theme for a unit. But if it is not problematized, it will not be particularly interesting or productive to discuss.” (143). If it is problematized, however, then we can begin to think together about when love can be an act of courage (hooks, Hill Collins), or a theme of “love and marriage” could raise interesting questions about individual and civil rights. We should be clear that when we speak of argument, we are not talking about persuasion () or a debate style stance in which the objective is to win a point. We conceive of argument as a process of theorizing and understanding.

Taken together, these openings provide an opportunity for a critical rethinking of curriculum. They allow us to plan in a different, more liberating way. The decentering of particular content in the common core permits us to center almost any issue, topic or idea and to expand our planning to include texts and artifacts which allow us to consider that idea from a variety of perspectives. Therefore, students can begin to investigate, synthesize and construct arguments related to the core idea. This is illustrated by the planning tool depicted in figure one which asks us to consider different disciplinary perspectives: self and society, past and present, creative thought, and scientific inquiry, as well as ways of thinking about these perspectives such as, how health and wellness, global visions, the influence of technology over time, and the perspectives of diverse groups can inform our thinking.

This process can be most easily illustrated with reference to a current event or issue. For example, the George Zimmerman murder trial can be considered from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives. If we place the Zimmerman trial and the resulting verdict in the center of the planning tool, we can then consider it from the various perspectives.

Under past and present, we might recall the murder of Emmett Till, or the more immediate past Marissa Alexander case, and ask how these events help us to understand the trial. In terms of Self and Society we might look at the “Stand Your Ground” laws, or the process of jury selection, the online responses to Rachel Jeantel’s testimony, or how Martin and Zimmerman were positioned in relation to the crime. For creative thought, we might look at the young adult novel, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, or even Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We could look at “Ella’s Song” or Langston Hughes’ poem, “Kids Who Die” and the artistic representations of Trayvon Martin so common on the internet. In scientific inquiry, we could look at the crime scene evidence, forensic evidence, science of jury selection, and linguistic analysis of Rachel Jeantel’s testimony. Obviously, these examples only scratch the surface of what might be possible.

While the socio-political implication of Zimmerman verdict might be more obvious, it is possible to take a critical approach to almost any topic or issue and adapt this process. Let us take for example, coffee. The key to developing a critical unit of a topic like coffee is to conceptualize it as a dynamic, socio-politically situated entity.

In a unit on coffee, we might look at the science of coffee production, addressing issues such as the agricultural methods and their ecological consequences, whether shade grown, organic, processed, the roasting process, etc. We might look at attempts to farm sustainably. We might also look at the effects of caffeine on the human body. In terms of past and present dimensions, we might look at the rise in consumption of coffee, and how the demand for coffee has affected the economies of producing nations. A self and society perspective might look at the rise of coffee shops and coffee bars, how coffee is tied to social class as in the images of people who drink “convenience store coffee” in the Dunkin Donuts advertisements, or their corresponding tee shirts which admonish that “Friends don’t let friends drink Starbucks.” We might look at the economics of coffee and price coffee in various types of coffee shops. We might look at how much of the purchase price is realized by those who grow the coffee, etc. In terms of creative thought, we might read *Out of Africa* through a post-colonial lens or look at the representations of coffee in popular culture, latte art, coffee cup design, advertisements

such as the vintage Folger's ad, songs such as Ella Fitzgerald's *Black Coffee*, and films such as *Black Gold: Wake up and Smell the Coffee*, or the documentary series *Black Coffee*. This is only a quick initial brainstorm. As with any idea, we would need to do research to be able to identify texts and artifacts related to our topic. Students could then choose particular questions related to the larger topic for further inquiry.

In order for this process to work well, both the idea or issue in the center and the texts and artifacts which surround it need to be considered from a dynamic, problematizing perspective. We need to raise questions about our central issue and about the texts and artifacts we choose. If we place a traditional topic of our curriculum such as the water cycle or the American dream, at the center, we run the risk of treating it as a static entity to be studied rather than a dynamic phenomenon to be challenged and investigated. However, by problematizing either of these topics, considering them in relation to power, access, opportunity and equity, we can make them dynamic and interesting.

Another opening in the Common Core is its emphasis on literacy across disciplines. While this process can be used to enrich any subject within disciplinary boundaries, it might be infinitely richer when undertaken as a cross-disciplinary endeavor. Elementary teachers could integrate reading, writing, speaking and listening in integrated projects which would address a topic in multiple ways and allow for deeper investigation and understanding. Middle school teachers might collaborate in teams to address a theme in various ways through the dimensions. High school teachers, whether working alone or in collaboration, can integrate various genres and types of texts as they explore their central focus.

When curriculum is planned in this way, the kind of critical and creative thinking required by the Common Core is facilitated for both students and teachers. Teachers and students can become co-investigators and learners, exploring topics and creating arguments which take into account the relationships between the texts and artifacts they uncover. Thus, the teachers' expertise is no longer centered in content, but teachers retain and enhance their expertise as leaders, thinkers, planners and curricular creators.

A pragmatic, visionary or subversive approach to the Common Core calls for both individual and local transformation as well as a more systemic change. The National Writing Project provides a case example of how to apply a model, rather than a program, across a variety of contexts in a way which is responsive to local needs and concerns while maintaining a set of values and principles. Through a professional network which honors and respects teacher knowledge, the writing project applies a model which emphasizes coherence, rather than alignment (Fullan). Our contention is that this model could be useful in our thinking about the Common Core.

The writing project is not only personally transformative for individual teachers (Whitney) but also provides a model of systemic transformation which does not rely on force or didactic method, which creates a culture, not a cult., which translates into a way of being in the world. Writing project teachers question practice, policy, and their own efficacy with their students. They learn through experience, theory, practice, and reflection, in community and in connection with the national network.

Similarly, this model we have described of resistance in practice can be responsive to local needs and applied across a variety of contexts.

Our alternative response to the Common Core, as exemplified by our curriculum planning tool, represents a form of resistance in practice. We hope that it provides a pragmatic, practice-based, and systemic response which also advances the vision and commitment to teaching and learning in a just and humane way with or without the Common Core.