What Is Common Core?

By Gabe Habash | Apr 10, 2013 | Publishers Weekly

Common Core, the state standards education initiative that is being developed across the country, was the focus of *PW*'s Discussion Series, held at Random House on April 10 in front of a sold-out audience. Panelists spoke enthusiastically about the potential the implementation of Common Core standards could have on students' performances, including author, editor, and publisher Marc Aronson, who said, that for anyone involved at all with education: “Standing on the sidelines and waiting for Common Core to pass is a mistake.” But why?

To begin with, the scope: 46 states in ELA (English/Language Arts) and 45 in mathematics have joined the Common Core State Standards initiative, with the first assessments already being conducted in Kentucky. (Standards in science and social studies are still being developed). But the main reason relates to the effect the initiative aims to have on students. Said Barbara Stripling, president-elect of ALA, “If I love Common Core for one reason this is it: we’re teaching kids how to think critically and creatively.”

Common Core’s goals seek to shift what students read, how they read, and how they are assessed. The initiative, therefore, requires well-researched informational text, well-crafted narrative text, and readings that engage critical analysis and reward rereading. What this means is students engaged in materials set forth by Common Core are reading with an eye toward reasoning and a use of evidence in the text. In short, reading materials are designed to promote comprehension and critical thinking, deep engagement rather than engagement of facts that simply skim the surface. “Understanding is deeper than information,” said Stripling.

In practice, Common Core materials include a focus on content-rich nonfiction—writing that contains evidence, so that students learn the value of forming their own opinions and arguments to convince others in their own writing. Questions asked of students while engaged with Common Core materials might include: How does the author form his/her opinion and support it with information in the text? How do you compare and reason through multiple arguments across multiple texts?

The reason for evidence-based reading and writing materials gets to the heart of the goals of Common Core: to prepare students for college and careers right out of high school. The most common form of writing in which students will engage after their education ends is evidence-based, and Common Core seeks to prepare students now for what they will need in the future.

Teaching that focuses on “content-rich nonfiction” doesn’t mean that fiction is no longer valued. Instead, an example of a Common Core-based lesson, as Student Achievement Partners’ David Liben pointed out, would be supplementing a reading of *Romeo and Juliet* with a *New York Times* article about Chinese tribalism. An English teacher did just this and saw his students become far more engaged with the text as a result, Liben said.
For both trade and academic publishers (many of whom were in attendance), panelists suggested developing a Common Core lens, a new way of seeing and sharing materials, both already published and to-be-published. More specifically, Aronson said, one way publishers can align with Common Core principles is to let schools use excerpts of their books. One teacher faced prohibitive costs to excerpt a short section of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* by Michael Pollan. “There’s no danger of poaching sales in letting students read a five-page excerpt,” said Aronson.
The majority of states will begin to implement standards between the current school year and the 2014-15 year. Publishers can find more information about Common Core at Achieve the Core.

Common Core Shifts for English Language Arts/Literacy

1. **Building knowledge** through **content-rich nonfiction**

Building knowledge through content rich non-fiction plays an essential role in literacy and in the Standards. In K-5, fulfilling the standards requires a 50-50 balance between informational and literary reading. Informational reading primarily includes content rich non-fiction in history/social studies, science and the arts; the K-5 Standards strongly recommend that students build coherent general knowledge both within each year and across years. In 6-12, ELA classes place much greater attention to a specific category of informational text—literary nonfiction—than has been traditional. In grades 6-12, the Standards for literacy in history/social studies, science and technical subjects ensure that students can independently build knowledge in these disciplines through reading and writing.

To be clear, the Standards do require substantial attention to literature throughout K-12, as half of the required work in K-5 and the core of the work of 6-12 ELA teachers.

2. Reading, writing and speaking grounded in **evidence from text**, both literary and informational

The Standards place a premium on students writing to sources, i.e., using evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information. Rather than asking students questions they can answer solely from their prior knowledge or experience, the Standards expect students to answer questions that depend on their having read the text or texts with care. The Standards also require the cultivation of narrative writing throughout the grades, and in later grades a command of sequence and detail will be essential for effective argumentative and informational writing.

Likewise, the reading standards focus on students' ability to read carefully and grasp information, arguments, ideas and details based on text evidence. Students should be able to answer a range of *text-dependent* questions, questions in which the answers require inferences based on careful attention to the text.

3. Regular practice with **complex text** and its **academic language**

Rather than focusing solely on the skills of reading and writing, the Standards highlight the growing complexity of the texts students must read to be ready for the demands of college and careers. The Standards build a staircase of text complexity so that all students are ready for the demands of college- and career-level reading no later than the end of high school. Closely related to text complexity—and inextricably connected to reading comprehension—is a focus on academic vocabulary: words that appear in a variety of content areas (such as *ignite* and *commit*).

Common Core Shifts for Mathematics

1. **Focus** strongly where the Standards focus

Focus: The Standards call for a greater focus in mathematics. Rather than racing to cover topics in today's mile-wide, inch-deep curriculum, teachers use the power of the eraser and significantly narrow and deepen the way time and energy is spent in the math classroom. They focus deeply on the major work* of each grade so that students can gain strong foundations: solid conceptual understanding, a high degree of procedural skill and fluency, and the ability to apply the math they know to solve problems inside and outside the math classroom.

2. **Coherence**: **think** across grades, and **link** to major topics* within grades

Thinking across grades: The Standards are designed around coherent progressions from grade to grade. Principals and teachers carefully connect the learning across grades so that students can build new understanding onto foundations built in previous years. Teachers can begin to count on deep conceptual understanding of core content and build on it. Each standard is not a new event, but an extension of previous learning.

Linking to major topics: Instead of allowing additional or supporting topics to detract from the focus of the grade, these topics can serve the grade level focus. For example, instead of data displays as an end in themselves, they support grade-level word problems.

3. **Rigor**: in major topics* pursue:
   - **conceptual understanding**,
   - procedural skill and **fluency**, and
   - **application**

with equal intensity.

Conceptual understanding: The Standards call for conceptual understanding of key concepts, such as place value and ratios. Teachers support students' ability to access concepts from a number of perspectives so that students are able to see math as more than a set of mnemonics or discrete procedures.

Procedural skill and fluency: The Standards call for speed and accuracy in calculation. Teachers structure class time and/or homework time for students to practice core functions such as single-digit multiplication so that students have access to more complex concepts and procedures

Application: The Standards call for students to use math flexibly for applications. Teachers provide opportunities for students to apply math in context. Teachers in content areas outside of math, particularly science, ensure that students are using math to make meaning of and access content.

Grade	*Focus Areas in Support of Rich Instruction and Expectations of Fluency and Conceptual Understanding
K–2	Addition and subtraction --concepts, skills, and problem solving, and place value
3–5	Multiplication and division of whole numbers and fractions – concepts, skills and problem solving
6	Ratios and proportional reasoning; early expressions and equations
7	Ratios and proportional reasoning; arithmetic of rational numbers
8	Linear algebra; linear functions

*For a list of major, additional and supporting clusters by grade, please refer to 'Focus in Math' on achievethecore.org pp. 4 - 12