
"A giant risk, as I see it, in the implementation of Common Core is that it will spawn skills-centric curricula. Indeed, every Common Core 'expert' we hear from seems to be advocating this approach."

This comment from an able and experienced teacher is one among several similar ones that teachers have recently posted on the Core Knowledge blog. Their worry is also mine.

The success of the Common Core Standards in Language Arts, adopted by more than 40 states, is supremely important for many reasons, not least because of the recent intensification of income inequality. Student scores on language arts tests are the single most reliable academic predictors of later income. The new language arts standards of the Common Core represent an historic opportunity for beneficial change in American schools -- if they are put into effect intelligently.

But if you look at the data in Amazon books, you will see that the bestselling books about the Common Core are "skills-centric" ones that claim to prepare teachers for the new language arts standards by advocating techniques for "close reading" and for mastering "text complexity" as though such skills were the main ones for understanding a text no matter how unfamiliar a student might be with the topic of the text. The fact is, though, that students' ability to engage in "close reading" and to manage "text complexity" is highly dependent on their degree of familiarity with the topic of the text. And the average likelihood of their possessing the requisite degree of familiarity with the various topics they encounter in life or on tests will depend upon the breadth of their knowledge. No amount of practice exercises (which takes time away from
knowledge-gaining) will foster wide knowledge. If students know a lot they’ll easily learn to be skilled in reading and writing. But if they know little they will perform poorly on language tests -- and in life.

We need to learn from recent painful experience. The failure of No Child Left Behind in fostering advanced language ability can be traced to the skills-centric test-prepping that left little room for the systematic gaining of knowledge. Of course there is one facet of the skills-centric approach to reading that should be applauded, and which did improve under NCLB -- the teaching of decoding. Learning to translate those symbols on the page into sounds and words is a skill that ought to be taught systematically between kindergarten and second grade, beginning with simple letter-sound correspondences and progressing step-by-step to complicated Greek-based spellings. More systematic instruction in phonics explains why test scores went up in the earliest grades under NCLB. But its neglect of knowledge building explains why student scores did not go up in later grades when tests emphasize comprehension.

Test anxiety was paradoxically the main reason that schools spent so much time on abstract skills like "comprehension strategies" and "inferring." My aim in this blog post addressed to parents is to explain why the best test prep for their child under the new Common Core standards will be a more systematic approach to imparting knowledge. My argument is simple: If understanding a text depends on some prior familiarity with the topic, then that will also be true of the passages on a language-arts test.

The more a student knows the better he or she will perform on any language-arts test -- whether or not that test is said to be "aligned" with the new Common Core standards. If we take a step back from the details of the Common Core standards we can see why this claim necessarily must be true. Older language arts tests -- such as Gates-Macginitie, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the Stanford 9, the Degrees of Reading Power, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and the verbal sections of the Armed Forces Qualification Test -- correlate well with each other, indicating that they are all accurately probing underlying competence in language. If the results of the Common Core tests are not strongly correlated with these well-validated ones, then the technical validity of the new tests would rightly be deemed unsatisfactory, and no state ought to adopt them. There is no reason to think that the top experts making the new Common Core tests are not well aware of this technical issue of correlation. It's the schools, rather, that need to reconsider what will really prepare their students for the new tests -- and a productive life.

One reason that the schools have been applying a skills-centric approach is that they have regarded reading as a uniform skill that develops in stages, rather than a highly variable skill which depends on a person's topic knowledge. The schools cannot be blamed for this. The stage-by-stage conception of reading is the theory that even top experts held up to a few decades ago. The notion that any text on any topic at the right level would enhance reading ability has encouraged our schools to tolerate a topic-incoherent curriculum in language arts. This indifference to knowledge building is the chief reason the verbal scores of our school leavers have stayed flat and low.
Cognitive scientists have found, however, that a student's average level of reading skill, which is reasonably accurately indicated by the standard tests, masks wide fluctuations depending on the test taker's familiarity with the topic. That's why reading tests typically use multiple passages on different topics -- characteristically about ten -- to try to capture that average. And even then, the passages are not random but have been filtered through the net of grade-level criteria like word rarity and sentence length. The whole system has conspired to make schools think that the topic knowledge is less important than "reading level." But now we know that the topic of the passage is far more important than the level. The more students know about a topic, the further above their level they can read on that topic. This new understanding of reading ability demands nothing less than a revolution in language arts instruction, with less emphasis on technique and more emphasis on the systematic acquisition of knowledge.

The new Common Core standards have recognized this research finding. They state that these standards "do not -- indeed, cannot -- enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn. The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum." And they add: "Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades." Well said! And we have to take care that the schools and the experts hear and act on that truth. Parents and concerned citizens should make sure that they do.

If any school wants to see a model for what this means in actual practice, there are a couple of resources on the Core Knowledge Foundation's website that should be useful. Here is a grade-by-grade content sequence for all subjects in preschool through eighth grade that is downloadable for free. This sequence takes into account the knowledge that is most needed and used in written language in the United States -- imparting topic familiarity as well as deeper insight across the topics that are most enabling for written communication. When schools use this sequence to write a rigorous curriculum, their students do well on language tests. Second, here is an early reading program -- preschool through third grade -- that systematically brings many history, science, and literary topics into the language arts classroom in sufficient depth so that the student becomes familiar with them. This pre-k - 3 program will be downloadable for free soon. For now, here's the list of topics, with each taking about 2-3 weeks to teach. Each has about 10-12 teacher read-alouds and related class discussions and extension activities.

The coming of the Common Core standards and tests need not be a new, harrowing imposition on already besieged schools. Rather they are an historic opportunity -- a new slate on which schools can write either a topic-indifferent, fragmented curriculum similar to what has failed before, or a new, exiting and successful orientation to knowledge. That's what the top experts -- the cognitive scientists -- are telling us, and it's a message that all parents, educators, and concerned citizens need to act upon.

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