The Glass Half Full: An Invitation to Civics and History Teachers to See Common Core as an Opportunity

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Given their wide adoption and the intensive efforts focused on implementation, the Common Core State Standards are going to have a significant impact on education. Whether that impact is positive or negative remains to be seen—especially when it comes to social studies (history, civics, geography, and economics).

This primer is intended to engage history and civics educators in seeing the Common Core as a glass half full—certainly not a panacea in and of itself, but a positive opportunity to put these subjects and the pedagogies for teaching them at the center of efforts to improve student learning.

To be clear, the Common Core does not attempt to name everything students should learn in civics or government or history. The content of these courses is covered in state social studies standards, and every state should be working to make sure they are excellent.

The Common Core, rather, elevates social studies content and best practices by integrating them with other subjects. Specifically, the Common Core:

• Articulates a set of speaking and listening standards that develop students’ abilities for active civic engagement.

• Recognizes explicitly that instruction in history and civics has an essential role in developing literacy.

• Names three specific texts crucial to civics education—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution (Preamble and Bill of Rights) and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address—to be analyzed in literacy exercises, and recommends several others.

Civics educators have important expertise and experience to contribute to Common Core implementation. The Common Core makes English language arts teachers responsible for analyzing seminal texts of American democracy, and civics and history educators can play an essential role in helping them do so by sharing their content knowledge and strategies for teaching these texts. Likewise, the Common Core articulates skills for deliberating, debating, and communicating that may be new to some ELA teachers but tend to be traditional areas of focus for civics and history teachers.

Cross-disciplinary, strategic collaborative efforts can strengthen Common Core implementation on multiple levels. Collaboration can take many forms, from joint professional development for sharing skills and approaches across the content areas to collaborative, cross-disciplinary unit planning and implementation. Common Core could become a new opportunity for civics and history teachers to lend their expertise to improving literacy instruction across the curriculum while strengthening their own practice and reclaiming their rightful place at the center of a good education.

For example, during a history unit on the Civil War, students might learn about the election of 1864 and the events surrounding it; in English class at the same time, they might spend several days closely reading and analyzing Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address for its rhetoric, structure, and syntax. Students might read the most...
significant texts in social studies and English classes, using different methods to achieve different academic goals and learning more deeply along the way.

Understanding what the Common Core does—and what it does not do—is an essential foundation for productively collaborating on implementation. The standards have been mischaracterized as limiting how democratic texts should be taught, and inaccurately criticized as encouraging anti-historical reading. They do neither.

In fact, the standards very specifically open the door to new, promising ways to read about and understand history and democracy. They do so by:

Articulating deliberative standards for speaking and listening

Democratic participation demands active engagement. Students need to learn how to process issues and arguments with others respectfully, but also with discernment when it comes to analyzing and prioritizing knowledge and evidence. They need to learn the norms of debate and deliberation and develop deliberative skills. Partly this is about critical thinking skills—knowing how to make logical, evidence-based arguments and how to critique the reasoning of others (skills prioritized in both the math and literacy standards). In addition to analytic skills, however, the Common Core enumerates a set of communication skills that are essential to active civic participation. Here are two examples:

- Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

- Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a fair hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

These are traditional strongholds of civics and history educators, and now all ELA teachers are expected to develop these skills, too. Schools, systems, and professional organizations should be looking for ways to share knowledge and strategies across these disciplines.

There is a key challenge to meeting these expectations: current tests don’t do a good job assessing this set of skills. With tests playing an inordinate role in school accountability, including, increasingly, defining the success of individual teachers, we need to find a way nonetheless to place value on developing debate and communication skills. Otherwise, we risk them being merely aspirational—a real loss, given how inextricably linked speaking and listening skills are to the type of reading and writing skills Common Core aspires to develop.

In this challenge, there is also an opportunity for states and districts to develop and propose creative ways of assessing these skills and integrate the results into measures of school and teacher effectiveness. Most state accountability policies require measures of student outcomes in addition to state test scores, so systems should engage educators in developing rigorous measures of students’ ability to interact with others—to present ideas, make arguments, critique reasoning—within and across groups. The International Baccalaureate (IB) program provides one model, but others need to be identified and new approaches developed.

Emphasizing analysis of primary source documents

The Common Core standards for literacy in history/social studies explicitly emphasize students engaging with primary source material. For example, the standards ask that students:

- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

- Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

Cross-disciplinary, strategic collaborative efforts can strengthen Common Core implementation on multiple levels.
• Evaluate authors’ differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors’ claims, reasoning, and evidence.

• Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

• Evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

• Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding.

It’s important to understand that the Common Core does not and should not attempt to define what good history or civics instruction looks like. History and civics teachers will recognize the skills listed above as necessary but not sufficient for developing students’ ability to “think historically” and/or participate actively in civic life. In a history or civics course, the emphasis should be on institutions, events, and social processes. So, for example, the Federalist Papers may be a valuable source, but the main topic should be the U.S. Constitution that the Federalist Papers advocated and defended. Students will have to understand how, when, by whom, and why the Constitution was written and ratified, what happened as a result, and the extent to which it has and has not enabled a just society. These issues will take the students far from the text and will require substantial amounts of time.

However, the Common Core does delineate the literacy skills that are especially important to develop within the social studies disciplines. This is an acknowledgment that the methods of analysis and communication that are taught in English language arts (ELA) are insufficient on their own to prepare literate students and citizens; history and civics teachers play an essential role here.

In the ELA standards, the Common Core emphasizes the application of these analytic skills to specific texts—the foundational documents of American democracy:

• Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

• Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., The Federalist, presidential addresses).

• Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms Speech, King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”).

While these documents have been central to history and civics classes for a long time, the ELA standards emphasize analyzing them for their rhetoric and reasoning. Without a doubt, students also need to learn about the historical and societal significance of these documents and the social, economic, and political conditions from which they emerged. Because the Common Core obliges English teachers to cover some content related to the country’s foundational texts, it is an ideal opportunity for civics and history teachers to collaborate with English teachers to ensure students study these texts holistically and comprehensively.
comprehensively. The Common Core does not require or ensure this collaboration, but it does invite it.

**Prioritizing research and publishing skills that are important to getting ideas out into the world**

Civics means much more than learning about the structure and processes of American government; it’s also about preparing students to be active participants in it. While Common Core does not cover active civic engagement, it defines a set of skills for researching and publishing arguments and opinions that are essential to this participation. For example:

- Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., quantitative data, video, multimedia) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

Although these are valuable skills, they are not the only skills that students need to become effective citizens. For one, students must also learn to understand political texts in their institutional, historical, and social contexts—matters not covered in the English Language Arts Common Core. Social studies teachers are still the ones who must develop the content students need to understand historical documents and determine how to convey this content.

There have been unfortunate misimpressions of what the Common Core’s expectations of “close reading of texts” mean for practice, in particular for social studies teachers—who have expressed worry that they will have to spend their time getting students to minutely dissect texts instead of helping them understand their genesis and context. In fact, close reading is not explicitly defined or called for by the Common Core; rather, this term is used to describe students’ ability to analyze text rigorously and independently.

It is important for students to develop these skills, but it also is important to recognize that close reading should be employed judiciously and strategically as one part of a comprehensive literacy strategy. Because many of the prominent examples of Common Core-aligned instruction have featured the close reading of a document from America’s democratic foundations, this has shaped what many people understand the Common Core to be about. The type of independent reading featured in these examples, however, should come at the end of or during a unit focused on the topic covered by the text, so that students have had an opportunity to build the background knowledge and broader contextual understanding they will need to understand and critically analyze the text. It is important for students to gain a level of mastery in reading and interpreting text, so that they can analyze new material and make meaning of it on their own. While foundational reading skills are usually taught in language arts, advanced application and adaptive skills are developed in the context of learning how to approach learning and reading within the academic disciplines.

The Common Core does not address many other important aspects of civics education, including, notably, the role of current events in preparing students for active civic participation. Many civic educators believe that it is essential for students to study recent developments in the civic life of the nation and states and communities in which they reside. We support the active engagement of students with the issues of the day. The Common Core doesn’t prevent that; it doesn’t speak to current events one way or another to the inclusion of current events one way or another.
To the extent that states, local communities, and schools want to prioritize this content, it will be alongside the demands of Common Core, not because of them.

Still, there are Common Core standards that certainly apply to the study of current events. Learning to conduct research on the Internet and synthesize information from multiple sources, weigh the credibility and relevance of evidence, and compare the relative strengths of various arguments—all of these skills are enumerated in the Common Core and can be strengthened through the study and debate of current events. Indeed, current events can provide a meaningful and engaging context for honing these skills. But the Common Core prescribes very little content, with the exception of founding texts of American democracy. It is up to state and district leaders, along with local educators, to determine the content and curriculum materials through which students will learn the literacy skills enumerated in the Common Core.

Conclusion

Common Core provides an opportunity to recommit to the democratic purposes of public education, to recalibrate instruction away from rote learning and inordinate focus on basic skills to developing responsible, intellectually curious students who are confident fully participating in American society. But that won’t happen if reductive approaches to boosting test scores crowd out rich instruction, if teachers feel more pressure than support, and if the misconceptions we have laid out here fuel opposition to the standards.

It would be most unfortunate if Common Core failed because its vision and provisions were not understood. Rather than limiting the content and teaching methods of history and civics education, as some have suggested, the standards can—with the help of informed and dedicated educators—make them central aspects of defining what it means to be a literate American.

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1 A good resource for states that are revising Social Studies standards is the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies; http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/c3/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf.

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