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The Common Core of Literacy and Literature

The writer describes how the Common Core State Standards in the English classroom can improve the teaching of literature as well as the teaching of literacy.

Rigor. Engagement. Reading between the four corners of the page. Literary non-fiction. Informational text. Textual evidence. Reading like a detective. Writing like an investigative reporter.

According to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the concomitant academic discourse, to ensure that our students are literate in the 21st century, all teachers must grapple with the ideas inherent in the words and phrases cited above. With the new standards comes a whole new set of responsibilities, assessments, and accountability measures. However, I welcome the new Common Core State Standards for one simple reason: finally, the standards gods have realized that *every* teacher is, to some degree, responsible for literacy instruction. This emphasis on literacy as a shared responsibility will now allow me to define literacy to suit my role, my discipline, and to willingly take ownership of the aspects of literacy that truly belong to a teacher of literature.

Literacy is the ability to decode text and to produce text to make meaning. Literacy is both a science and a skill. It is the mechanics of reading and writing. It provides the structures and patterns—the engineering—that enable literature to exist. Literacy is the foundation for all word-based communication.

Literature, on the other hand, is the art of reading and writing. It is cerebral and visceral—explicit and implicit. It thrives on ambiguity and nuance. It requires the reader and the writer to have profound insight into the human condition and to

be able to comprehend and/or convey those ideas with skill and imagination. Literature—both the production and the interpretation of it—requires the writer and the reader to have excellent literacy skills to access and/or produce text that, as Ray Bradbury wrote, has “pores” (80). Although literacy is the basis for literature, a society that promotes only transactional, foundational literacy at the expense of the literacy skills literature demands would be shallow and dispassionate—one that promotes paint-by-number illustrations at the expense of a Sistine Chapel. Although today the text in question and the medium used may take many forms, 21st-century literacy is a set of complex skills that students need to master to fully understand sophisticated literary texts. After all, if the student does not have the prerequisite skills to read the text or respond to the prompt we assign, then the distinction between literacy and literature is moot.

This point has been made dramatically clear to me during the past four years that have encompassed my second career. When I retired in 2007 after teaching secondary English for more than 38 years, I vowed to never return to the classroom. However, when *Car Talk* started to become the highlight of my week, I knew it was time to go back to what I loved—teaching English language arts.

As a result, when an opportunity to work as a part-time Title I reading specialist in a local charter school came my way, I took it. Although I had made it clear from the beginning that I had majored in the teaching of English, not reading, the leadership at this progressive school, North Central

Charter Essential School, decided to take a chance on me. Therefore, for the past three years, I have been immersed in issues related to literacy instruction. This year, however, I am back where I started my career—teaching several sections of ninth-grade American literature. Now, however, my teaching has a new twist. I am attempting to remember what I always knew. I am not teaching *literature*. First, my job is to teach *students* to *understand* literature. Second, my task is to teach them how to access, comprehend, and create literature by establishing a benchmark for their reading and writing skills and then ensuring that those skills expand.

Indeed, my experience working as a Title I reading specialist now informs my teaching in several specific ways worth sharing.

What Teachers of Literature Need to Learn from Teachers of Literacy

It is easier for a student to refuse to read than to admit he or she can't.

In spite of the advent of high-stakes tests, I still have students who do not read on grade level. Reports such as *Time to Act*, commissioned by the Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, suggest that my experience is not unique:

the pace of literacy improvement in our schools has not kept pace with the accelerating demands of the global knowledge economy. In state after state, the testing data mandated by No Child Left Behind reveals a marked decline in the reading and writing skills of adolescent learners. (12)

In my first career, however, I naively thought that the students who didn't read and/or write the assignments I gave were just bored or oppositional. Occasionally, I would find a text or a writing assignment that truly engaged these students, but, for the most part, I was too willing to accept the commonly held assumption of that time—that a few of my students were just not programmed to like reading and writing. Now I know better.

Furthermore, as much as I have deplored the narrowing of the curriculum and the punitive accountability measures that an over-emphasis on quantitative data has engendered, I have to admit that when used wisely, data can and should inform instruction. Because of the work I have done in

teaching remedial reading, I now understand how varied and complex reading problems can be. It is entirely possible, for example, that a student can decode words accurately, but because he or she has not achieved automaticity and fluency, the 30 pages that I estimated would take most students 30 to 40 minutes to read might take that student three hours. No matter how well intentioned he or she is, to this student my reading assignments soon become daunting.

As a teacher of literature, I now see my recalcitrant students in a different light. Perhaps those students who are acting out or procrastinating with a reading or writing assignment are doing so not because they want to engage me in a power struggle; perhaps they are just trying to tell me that they can't do what I've asked.

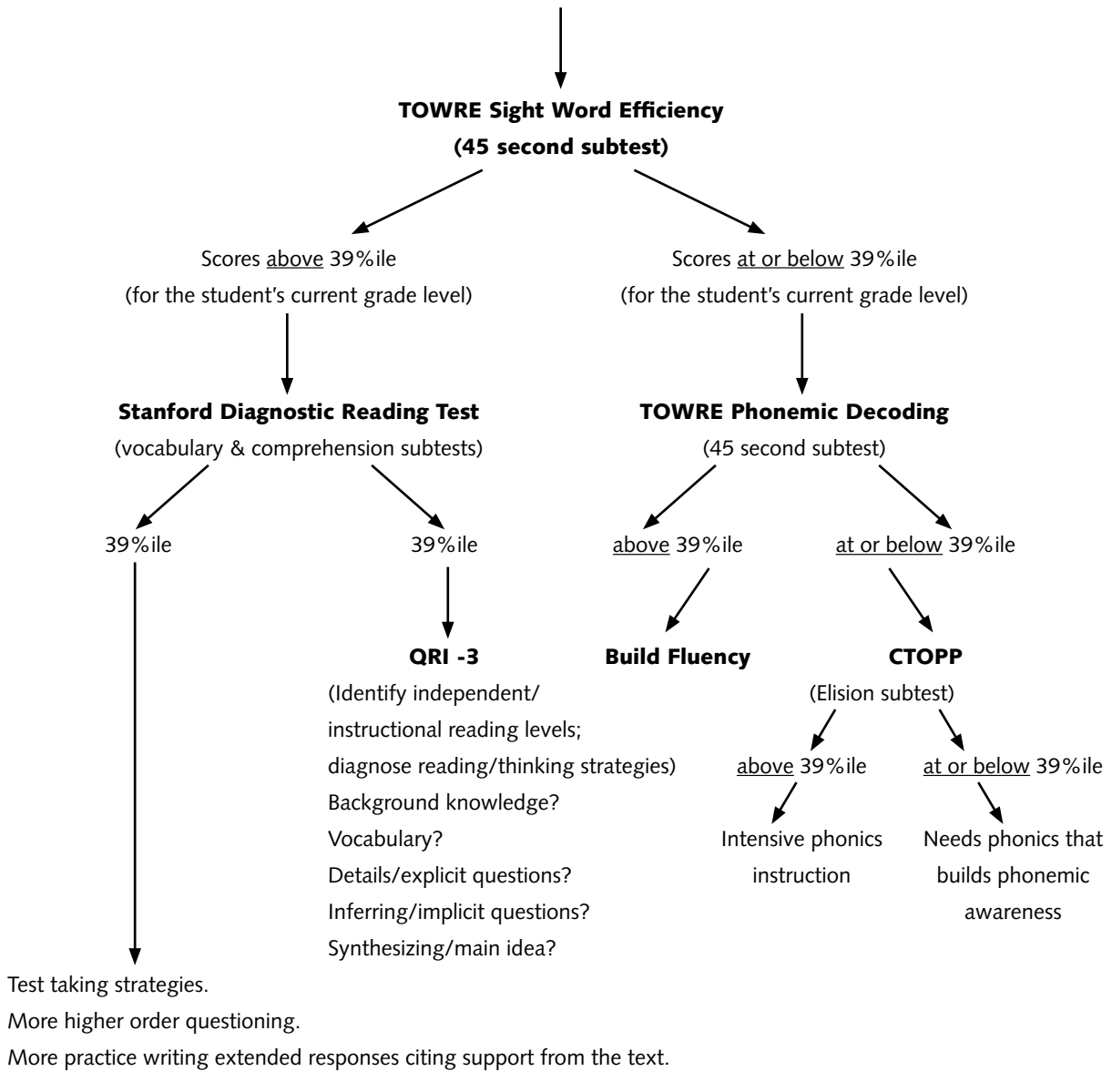
Struggling readers can be helped, but only if given additional time on learning.

Contrary to what I had been led to believe earlier in my career, even older students can be helped to improve their literacy skills. Admittedly, the job is far more difficult the older a student is, but students can be helped at any age with appropriate, strategic interventions.

Our school has done an excellent job of helping secondary teachers, especially teachers of English, understand and interpret the data generated by a number of literacy assessments. In the spring of every school year, grade level teams gather with literacy specialists to interpret the pre- and post-reading tests, as well as other qualitative assessment tools. One literacy specialist at our school, Pete Nelson, has shown us how to use the Diagnostic Decision Tree developed by Joseph K. Torgesen and Lynda Hayes (see Figure 1). This protocol allows us to target the specific needs of students who scored below average on norm-referenced reading assessments. We also consider the results of the most recent statewide (Massachusetts) assessment (MCAS) and our own in-house benchmarks, which are given periodically throughout the year in preparation for the state assessment.

In addition, under the guidance of Pete Nelson, we have used a protocol based on the work done by the Kennewick, Washington, School District (Fielding, Kerr, and Rosier 38–39) to help us determine how much additional time in literacy

FIGURE 1. Diagnostic Decision Tree for Students Performing Below Standards on a Measure of Reading Comprehension in Third Grade or Later



instruction our students need to “catch up” to their grade level (see Figure 2). As Lucy Calkins states when she cites Malcolm Gladwell’s research into how successful athletes and musicians gained their expertise: “The unifying factor that led to their greatness? Hours of practice. Hours and hours. Ten thousand hours. Readers, too, become great when they have many hours of practice” (Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman 31). Although North

Central Charter is not yet providing students with hours and hours of literacy practice, our emphasis on literacy is having some impact. Arguably, this emphasis is at least partially responsible for the fact that within Massachusetts’ state accountability classification system, NCCES moved up from a Level Three designation (i.e., the lowest performing 20 percent of schools) in 2011 to a Level One designation (i.e., a school meeting gap-narrowing goals

FIGURE 2. Formula for Determining Catch-up Time

- Identify students whose GRADE (or similar norm referenced reading test) is below 50.
- Subtract the student's percentile ranking from 50.
- Divide by 13 (13 percentile points = one year of growth) to approximate how many years behind grade level the student is.
- Multiply the number of years behind grade level by 50, which represents in minutes the unit of literacy needed for a typical student to achieve annual growth.

Based on these calculations, a student's schedule would be adjusted so that he or she would have the additional minutes of literacy instruction per day beyond the grade-level ELA course to ensure annual growth as well as catch-up growth.

for *all* students, as well as for high-needs students) in 2012.

This kind of collaboration between classroom teachers and literacy specialists benefits students in a number of ways. By working closely with literacy specialists, teachers of literature—like me—will learn enough about basic literacy skills to distinguish between students who can read but don't, and those who don't read because they can't. Likewise, because teachers of literature are immersed in reading and writing activities on a daily basis, they, in particular, need to be trained to recognize specific literacy problems to advocate for specialized literacy interventions.

How Instruction in Literacy and Literature Overlap

As a result of my deeper understanding of literacy, I now see how the teaching of literacy skills and of literature can be integrated more effectively. This realization struck me in particular when I started using *REWARDS*, a scripted program designed for older students whose reading difficulties stem from problems related to word identification and fluency (Archer, Gleason, and Vachon). In this program, students are taught the sounds associated with each letter or letter pattern. Subsequently, through the use of recursive practice exercises during which students call out the vowel sounds, circle the affixes, and draw lines to scoop together the morphemes,

the relationship between sounds and word parts in multisyllabic words is indelibly imprinted on students' minds.

As I used this multisensory approach with small groups of students, I started to see similarities to such standard practices as paired reading, choral reading, and poetic scansion. Although I had used such practices in my English classroom in the past, I am now placing a renewed emphasis on the oral component of literature. Asking high

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school students to routinely read passages aloud in unison or to scan lines of iambic pentameter in a poem by Frost or to read a passage from *To Kill a Mockingbird*—the way readers might imagine Zeebo would have “lined” in church—are simple ways to engage struggling students and to help them develop that inner rhythm that good readers cultivate on their own. I do not force reluctant students to read aloud individually before the whole class, nor do I ask pairs or groups of students to read aloud without appropriate preparation. I also try to model good oral reading for students as often as possible and to point out where and why I pause or emphasize a certain word or phrase. These practices are all practices that a teacher of literature probably already has in his or her repertoire, but they take on a whole new importance when they are seen in light of addressing specific literacy skills, such as fluency and automaticity.

Another new perspective my foray into teaching reading has given me is related to the use of specific strategies to help struggling students comprehend content-area reading. The majority of teachers at North Central Charter have been trained in an instructional protocol developed by Joan Sedita. This protocol, known as *The Key Comprehension Routine*, is “a set of comprehension, writing and study strategies that help students understand and learn content information” (ix). The strategy that I found most effective for helping students determine the main idea of informational text and to then distinguish between main idea and details was the use of two-column notes (13–14).

The experience of working with two-column notes has made me aware of how the source of

trouble for many struggling readers is their inability to notice patterns in text. As a result, I now use strategies from *The Key Comprehension Routine* to teach specific literary concepts. For example, to teach theme, a concept students often find difficult to grasp, I start with think-alouds. I note what words and/or synonyms are repeated, what symbols are used several times, and what the title might be suggesting. To keep track of these clues as a pattern evolves, I ask students to mark and cue their text or to keep a running record of these clues on “evidence logs” (see Figure 3). These evidence logs, a phrase I coined as a result of reading *Teaching Students to Read Like Detectives* (Fisher, Frey, and Lapp), resemble the two-column note templates that are used as part of *The Key Comprehension Routine*. For English teachers, asking students to provide textual evidence is not a new practice. However, by using a template in my literature class that looks like those used to improve comprehension skills in other content-area classes, I can reinforce the use of specific reading strategies and foster connections between those reading strategies and specific literary concepts. I can also provide students with a way to trace literary features as they come upon the evidence, or in the words of Kylee Beers and Robert E. Probst, to note important signposts in a text. The more often I can develop graphic organizers that help striving students uncover patterns, the easier it will be for these readers and writers to deepen their mastery of literacy skills and, consequently, their understanding of literature.

When it comes to teaching students how to analyze literary nonfiction, I again borrow from Sedita’s work. When students deconstruct an expository mentor text—preferably one of literary merit—by filling in a two-column note template, they easily see how the components of this piece of writing correlate to the parts of the graphic organizers/templates they are routinely asked to use in planning their own essays. For some students, this cross-textual analysis is the only way they will internalize the patterns inherent in literary nonfiction.

In addition, by encouraging students to develop their own templates for unpacking the variety of ways writers of creative nonfiction can shuffle around ideas while still offering the reader an introductory element, a body, and a conclusion, I hope to move students beyond the basic five-paragraph

essay formula. By using graphic organizers to deconstruct well-written models, students will see how these textual patterns can be used in their own creative essays. Practice in taking two-column notes will also provide students with a way to access the often challenging informational text they are required to consult during the writing of research papers. In essence, the two-column note template—when turned horizontally—resembles the configuration of the standard note-taking cards that have been a mainstay of the research process.

By far, however, the most important reading strategy I now use in my American literature classroom has been the use of questioning techniques. Although I have experimented with having students generate questions based on Bloom’s Taxonomy, as Sedita recommends (103), I have found that the most useful question-generation technique is the one based on the shared inquiry guidelines promoted in the *Junior Great Books Curriculum* (8). After modeling how Level One questions differ from Level Two questions, I ask students to generate their own questions on assigned texts. Level One questions are concrete and can be answered simply and quickly with a specific answer in the text. Level Two questions are interpretive; they have more than one “right” answer, but the answer must be substantiated by several pieces of evidence from the text. Level Three questions, which are evaluative and ask students to make connections beyond the text, follow. Since it is easy to overemphasize tangential connections, at the expense of substantive literary analysis of the text, I make sure that my students pursue Level Three questions only after they have done a close reading based on Level One and Level Two questions.

Although the CCSS promote the use of more informational text in all grade levels, teachers of literature are still being asked to teach *literature*. Indeed, it is doubtful that any edict from afar would ever keep teachers of literature from their mission. After all, as the quote from Juan Ramón Jiménez states in the epigraph to *Fabrenheit 451*, when we are confronted with “ruled paper” and demands that we stay between the lines, we will often “write the other way.” As teachers of an art form, we embrace our medium—the rich and ever-expanding canon of words and ideas that stimulate our minds by pricking our senses. Only teachers who truly understand

FIGURE 3. Reading Like a Detective: Evidence Log

Title of Text		
Literary Clues	What to Look For	Evidence and Page #
Inferences—Conclusions		
• Repetition	Notice when ideas, words, and/or images are repeated either in exact words or similar words	
• Symbols	Notice when the writer gives special meaning to an object and/or person	
Characterization		
• Direct information	What does the writer say about the character?	
• Dialogue	What does the character say to show who he or she is?	
• Actions	What does the character do to show who he or she is?	
• Thoughts/feelings	What does the character think or feel to show who he or she is?	
• Reputation	What do other characters say or feel about the character being analyzed?	
• Interactions	How do other characters react to the character in question?	

Theme—What idea about life does the writer want you to think about as a result of reading this story? After reading the story—**so what?**

Follow the instructions below to develop your “working” theme statement.

• Close reading	Make sure you used active reading strategies as you read thoroughly and thoughtfully. Review any notes you took while reading/during class discussions.
• Resolution	Reread the ending.
• Exposition	Reread the exposition.
• Title	Consider the meaning of the title.
• Other features	See if the text includes features beyond the basic story, such as a foreword, an epigram, a dedication, a prologue, an epilogue, illustrations, etc.
• Inferences	Check your notes from the evidence log on inferences.
• Characterization	Check your notes from the evidence log on characterization.


Working Theme Statement:

1. Add up all of the evidence you found above and then complete this sentence:

When I am done reading this text, the writer wants me to think about _____

2. List all the pieces of evidence you could use to support this theme statement.

If you cannot find at least ten good pieces of evidence, try on another theme statement.

literature in this way are capable of guiding students to this same understanding. However, in this era of the Common Core, teachers of literature also need to share some responsibility for the teaching of the wide range of literacy skills that provide students with access to great literature. English teachers can learn much from literacy specialists—from how to use quantitative data to inform instruction to how to incorporate specific skill-building strategies and techniques into the teaching of literature. By wholeheartedly joining forces with literacy specialists through, for example, the formation of literacy teams and co-teaching, teachers of literature will be uniquely poised to demonstrate for teachers of all disciplines how “strong literacy skills and deep content understanding are interdependent and mutually reinforcing” (Plaut 4). Only through this kind of collaboration will our students ever become truly literate and the full potential of the Common Core State Standards be realized. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Using graphic organizers can help students make meaning from a text. The ReadWriteThink.org Double-Entry Journal printout helps students record ideas and situations from texts in one column, and their reactions in the second, thus making a connection between the text and themselves, another text, or the world. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/printouts/double-entry-journal-30660.html>