THE COMMON CORE IN THE UNITED STATES

A major shift in standards and assessment

Ann M. Johns

Most of the published works on English for academic purposes (EAP) theory, research, and practice have focused upon graduate (e.g., Swales, 1990) and, to a lesser extent, undergraduate (e.g., MacBeth, 2006) English as a second language (ESL)/English as a foreign language (EFL) or novice students and their literacies; however, as Charles (2013) notes,

the [EAP] term is very broad, covering, for example,….the requirements of native-speaker secondary school students who have read textbooks and write essays.

(p. 137)

Not surprisingly, Humphrey (this volume) points out that in many parts of the world, particularly in areas where systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is the major theoretical guide, as in Australia, students at all levels of instruction fall under the EAP rubric. Although “EAP” may not be a familiar term in North America, the topics discussed in works for public school teachers (e.g., Dean, 2008; Schneider, 2003) overlap, in many cases, with those that relate to post-secondary education. In this region, college and university education differs significantly in terms of structure, instruction, and administration from the public schools; nonetheless, many of the classroom EAP issues are shared across the educational spectrum.

K-12 public education in the US has always been the province of the states, with standards and assessments developed in state departments of education. Thus, for this country, the idea of having national academic standards and examinations for all public school students, grades K-12, has long been an anathema. The US Constitution, passed in 1789 and still in force, was the product of negotiation among vociferous “states’ rights” advocates and those who desired to create a powerful federal government. Because there was no agreement, public education of K-12 students was not specifically mentioned in the original document; but the 10th amendment, written immediately following (1791), stated that “powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively.” Therefore, in the intervening years, though the federal government has contributed public lands to schools, supported them financially in a variety of ways, and prodded them into compliance with basic tenets of the Constitution, states have always been
responsible for their own sometimes unique and unusual educational standards, teaching, and testing for kindergarten to twelfth grades.

In the intervening years, various factors other than discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or disability, have been increasing matters of interest to the federal government. The Cold War and Russia’s Sputnik led to the belief that America’s public educational system was falling behind that of other countries, so the National Defense Education Act (1958) was passed to support teachers of science, mathematics, and foreign languages. A widely circulated report, written by some of the country’s educational leaders, A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, commissioned by President Reagan in 1983, warned citizens that the USA was falling behind educationally and made a number of recommendations regarding standards and testing. Based particularly on the “falling behind” claim, the demand for improved educational practice as realized in high-stakes assessment has become more insistent. The resultant “high-stakes” exams, often administered from the state level, measured student progress in English language, reading, writing, and mathematics. Scores for each school, and often each student and teacher, have frequently been published.

Since the 1990s, the federal government, under the leadership of various presidents, has both incentivized and threatened states in an attempt to improve high-stakes test scores as the primary measure of student success. For example, George W. Bush’s administration (2001–2009) imposed, and attached directly to funding formulas, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy, in which states and districts were required to “be accountable” through frequent assessment of mathematics and reading, and to make “adequate yearly progress” toward the goals of grade level proficiency by 2014. Under NCLB, districts, schools, administrators, and teachers were denied funding, schools were closed, and teachers were evaluated based upon the results of the yearly state examinations. Still, the actual setting of standards as well as the writing and administration of the high stakes examinations remained with the states, as had been the case for more than two hundred years. As a result, there was a lack of uniformity of standards and assessments from state-to-state—even zip code to zip code—which made it impossible to tell how well all students were actually performing compared to students in other areas (see League of Women Voters, n.d.).

Results in 2012 from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), administered in 64 nations, indicated that more than 20 countries’ students achieved better scores in math and science tests than their US counterparts. The US National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, n.d.) indicated that in 2013, 26 percent of all students were at their grade proficiency levels in mathematics and 18 percent were at grade level in reading. Perhaps most influential in the lead-up to the Common Core has been the research conducted over the years by a venerable non-profit assessment organization, the ACT, which has long bench-marked students’ college readiness. Repeatedly, ACT studies have shown that many students who complete secondary school in the United States are not prepared to take entry-level college courses “with a reasonable chance of succeeding.” In their 2007 research report (ACT, 2007), ACT made this widely-circulated statement, greatly influencing what has followed:

ACT’s findings suggest the ability to read complex texts is the clearest differentiator between those ready for college-level reading and those not. Only about half (51%) of the nearly 1.2 million 2005 high school graduates who took the ACT college admission and placement exam met the College Readiness Benchmark for reading on the exam. Students who reach or exceed the benchmark are likely ready to handle the reading requirements for typical credit-bearing first-year college social
science courses. Students college-ready in reading are also significantly more likely to be college-ready in English, math, and science as well. Further, students who are ready for college-level reading are more likely to enroll, earn better grades, and stay in college.

Responding to these findings, President Obama’s administration initiated the “Race for the Top” (2008), providing grants for innovation under the newly designed Common Core State Standards (CCSS). However—and this is important—the CCSS were not federally imposed or created. Instead, they originated in 2008 with the National States’ Governors Association which established a task force of commissioners of education, governors, corporate chief executives, and educational experts, a prestigious group that sponsored the production of a skills-focused report on what American students should know and be able to do, particularly in terms of reading and math, to eventually succeed in college and careers in the twenty-first century. The proponents of the CCSS argue that these standards have been long in the making, involving consultation with organizations such as the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, as well as the major teacher unions (Bidwell, 2014). However, Diane Ravitch, an educational leader and major opponent of the CCSS standards, maintains that the process of standards creation was flawed, for it involved fewer than thirty individuals, principally from testing consortia (ACT and NAEP) and the corporate world, and was funded by the Gates Foundation. She goes on to say that the CCSS were written in a manner that violates the nationally and international recognized process for writing standards. The process by which they were created was so fundamentally flawed that these “standards” should have no legitimacy. Setting national academic standards is not something done in stealth by a small group of people, funded by one source and imposed by the lure of a federal grant in a time of austerity.

(Strauss, 2014b)

Whatever the case, most governors backed the project while the federal government provided financial support; and as of December, 2014, departments of education in 43 of the 50 states had adopted the CCSS. Growing evidence suggests that most teachers around the country approve of the standards (Huffington Post, 2012) and are quite willing to attempt their implementation (see also Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2014), though they are justifiably concerned about assessment difficulty and how scores of CCSS high-stakes tests will be used (see Rethinking Schools, 2013).

What are the Common Core State Standards?

Simply put, the CCSS is a set of end of the school year assessment targets focusing on relatively few, generalizable high-quality academic abilities; that is, what the originators assert students should be able to do (e.g., summarize, identify appropriate language in a text, solve a problem) in mathematics and English/language arts, and, by extension, in other content areas, in order to be college and career ready. The standards are horizontally-imposed: in all content areas (history/social studies, science, and technical subjects) at each grade level (e.g., ninth grade), teachers are held responsible for the standards for that grade. The CCSS for literacies are also aligned vertically, from kindergarten (age 5) up to grade 12 (age 18), with
the Anchor Standards providing the core skills for increasingly difficult tasks. Mathematics, not discussed in this chapter, is organized and articulated through “mathematical practices.”

The Anchor Standards for reading (Box 35.1), identified by ACT as the most important academic skill, list nine core abilities (Anchor Standards), which, when articulated horizontally at each grade level, extend to all of the content areas, excluding mathematics; and when aligned vertically, become increasingly demanding as students progress through the grades.

The Anchor Standards are general skills, of course; so at each grade level, these Anchor Standards are further delineated to explain to teachers and assessors for all content areas the
subskills that students should be able to master at that academic level in all content areas. This is called “horizontal” alignment in that teachers in all content areas, but mathematics, are to be working on the same subskills. Box 35.1 indicates the Anchor Standards for reading, the most important EAP skill in the CCSS.

How is each Anchor Standard aligned vertically, from grade 5–12? In Box 35.2 are examples of this grade-level subskill alignment for Informational Reading Anchor Standard 5.

The Anchor Standards for writing, divided into the general categories of informational, narrative, and persuasive texts, increasingly emphasize expository and persuasive written, visual, and digital texts over fiction and student narratives: due, in large part, to the perceived literacy demands of the sciences and social sciences as well as the literacies required in the students’ future college and professional lives. Personal writing (such as reflection) and text-to-self connections, earlier common in K-12 pedagogies, are downplayed. Research writing and the use of technology are also integral to the standards, while speaking and listening Anchor Standards, which mirror some of those in reading and writing, emphasize comprehension and discourse analysis, collaboration, logical presentation of ideas, evaluation, and sophisticated uses of technology. The language standards are quite general, typical of some of the more common tests of English as a second or foreign language, as they require grammatical accuracy and appropriate word choice. For language use, context is important; students are asked to recognize and employ domain-specific language and understand how language functions in different academic contexts.

Mathematics standards, which are not the subject of this chapter, are demanding linguistically, as students reason abstractly and quantitatively, constructing arguments for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 35.2 CCSS vertical alignment across grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vertical alignment example:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1: Know and use headings,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tables of contents, glossaries…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5: Compare and contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overall structures (cause/effect,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problem/solution…)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9-10: Analyze in detail how</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>claims are developed in a portion of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11-12: Evaluate the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effectiveness of a specific text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>structure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading Anchor
Standard 5:
English/LA
Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
their mathematical processes and critiquing the reasoning of others. The principal emphasis is upon a deep understanding of math concepts and procedures, as the purely computational aspect is deemphasized.

It is important to note that the CCSS Anchor Standards do not prescribe curricula or pedagogies; they are standards for skills achievement to be assessed, as aligned subskills, at specific grade levels. How classrooms are organized, pedagogies are written, and instruction is differentiated for ESL/EFL or students with disabilities are all the responsibility of the states and school districts. As a result, many states, such as California, provide resources for instruction (see, for example, www.cde.ca.gov/re/cc/). Some state websites carefully point out that CCSS is the “what” of student skills and strategies. “How” students are taught is still local option (www.polki.com/news/2014/jul/16/adoption-curriculum-varies/).

With this major sea change, the textbook companies have jumped on board; however, some school districts have refused to adopt commercial volumes because in a number of cases, companies merely sell the old books with new covers, according to Cindy Marten, the San Diego Unified School District Superintendent of Schools (2014). Two of the most important CCSS writers, David Coleman, president of the College Board and Susan Pimentel, an educational analyst, have created Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy (2011) to give the publishers direction.

**Why support the Common Core?**

What are the principal arguments in favor of the CCSS? As is the case in many parts of the world, Americans are increasingly mobile. Within the United States, the CCSS guarantees that students will be tested with the same standards throughout most of the country, with the exception of those states that refuse to participate. It is also argued that the standards are more relevant to the literacy practices of colleges and careers than were many of the previous ones, and the creators maintain that there is sufficient research to support this claim (Rothman, 2012). Though there is some overlap with standards of the past, differences related to this relevance to students’ futures are evident, even in the lower grades. Box 35.3, for example, compares sections from the previous California standards for third grade (age 8) and those of the Common Core.

The differences shown in Box 35.3 are clear. Informational and persuasive texts predominate in writing standards, particularly as students become more mature. Students’ opinions (arguments) must be based at least partially on sources outside of the students themselves. In addition, there is increased focus on higher order thinking, e.g., about how ideas are developed and carried by a writer through a text.

**How are the standards assessed?**

Rather than work through a single agency (e.g., Cambridge, Educational Testing Service, a university), most state boards of education have contracted with one of two private consortia, PARCC or Smarter Balanced Consortium (SBAC), to create and administer the assessments, almost all of which will be online. There are some differences between the two consortia’s approaches; however, they are sufficiently similar to discuss only one here. SBAC (www.smarterbalanced.org/), which serves 21 of the states, has been selected. On its homepage, SBAC claims that it “is developing a system of valid, reliable, and fair assessments aligned with the Common Core.” Although extensive research measuring these assessment concepts has yet to be conducted, the writers claim that the CCSS Anchor Standards based on the
**Box 35.3 Standards for writing, grade 3: past and present**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 3: California Standards (2000), previous to the CCSS</th>
<th>Grade 3: Common Core State Standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing applications</strong> (genres and their characteristics)</td>
<td><strong>Text types and purposes</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General description:</strong> Students write compositions that describe and explain familiar objects, events, and experiences. Student writing demonstrates a command of standard American English and drafting, research, and organizational strategies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(i)2.1 Write narratives:</strong> Provide a context within which an action takes place, include well-chosen details to develop the plot, provide insight into why the selected incident is memorable.</td>
<td>CCSS ELA-LiteracyW.3.1A: <em>(i)</em> Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons. <em>(i)</em> Introduce the topic or text they are writing about, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure that lists reasons; provide reasons that support the opinion, use linking words or phrases, and provide a concluding statement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(i)2.2. Write descriptions</em> that use concrete sensory details to present and support unified impressions of people, places, things, or experiences.</td>
<td>CCSS ELA-LiteracyW.3.2: <em>(i)</em> Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly. <em>(i)</em> Introduce the topic and group related information together; include illustrations when useful to aiding comprehension; develop the topic with facts, definitions, and details; use linking words or phrases to connect ideas within categories of information; provide a concluding statement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(i)2.3 Write personal and formal letters, thank-you notes, and invitations.</em> <em>(i)</em> Show awareness of the knowledge and interests of the audience and establish a purpose and context. Include the date, proper salutation, body, closing, and signature.</td>
<td>CCSS ELA-LiteracyW.3.3: <em>(i)</em> Write narratives <em>(i)</em> to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clear event situations. Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally; use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations; use temporal words and phrases to signal event order; provide a sense of closure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* With Charles Bazerman, the author of this chapter helped to convince the National Assessment of Educational Progress (and the CCSS) that “text types” was a better term than “genres,” which is contested.
demands of college and career and the text items themselves demonstrate predictive validity. Reliability and fairness claims cannot be determined as of this writing.

What do the tests look like? There are four types of test items in all content (English, science...) and skill (reading, writing, language, speaking, and listening) areas, three of which appear here. The first is the selected response, multiple choice questions with a difference. More than one answer may be correct, so students are asked to indicate all of those that they believe to be right (or wrong). Box 35.4 is an example of a selected response question for eighth grade students, aligned at that grade level with the Anchor Standard 1 for reading informational texts. Identified as LA.8.RI.1, the standard is realized for grade 8 in this way: Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

A second item type is constructed response. For reading in all content areas, these items consist of single questions in which students are to provide an answer and then give textual evidence to support it. In tests designed for younger students, no more than three sentences may be required; but as the students progress through the grades, they might be asked to provide a three- to four-paragraph response to a task or prompt. Box 35.5 is an example for (Literary) Reading Anchor Standard 2, aligned for the 4th grade: CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RL.4.2: Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

The final test item type that appears in all literacy content and skill areas is the performance task for which students are allotted time to write a “structured process” text (Smagorinsky, et.al., 2010). The CCSS website tells readers that:

Performance tasks measure a student’s ability to integrate knowledge and skills across multiple standards—a key component of college and career readiness. Performance tasks will be used to better measure capacities such as depth of understanding, research skills, and complex analysis, which cannot be adequately assessed with selected- or constructed-response items. Some constructed-response items and performance tasks can be scored automatically; many will be hand-scored by professionally trained readers.

(Smarter Balanced, n.d.)

Some central elements of performance tasks for writing are listed in Box 35.6. The number of stimuli provided in the task depends upon the grade, with one or two for grade 3 and up to five for grades 10–12.

According to the Smarter Balanced homepage, these tasks are divided into two parts which can be extended to 35 minutes or more, depending upon a number of factors established by the test instructions. Box 35.7 shows a few task examples, indicating the cross-curricular purposes of CCSS (Smarter Balanced Appendix B, pp. 36 & 183). The assumption appears to be that students will discover differences among disciplinary discourses through the activities leading up to the final writing tasks.

How do social semiotic approaches and the US Common Core Standards and Assessments compare?

At the most abstract levels, goals of the two approaches appear to be quite similar. Humphrey (this volume), quoting Macken-Horarick (1996, p. 247), notes that students in Australia and elsewhere, influenced by the long history of systemic functional linguistics research and curriculum development, are being asked to work with language “beyond the here and now—beyond the me and you” —to examine and write from texts that are deemed academic
Box 35.4 Selected response: informational text

Instructions: Read this sentence from paragraph 8 in your (online) text:

Our contemporary situation demands that we help our young people find their way by marrying the cultivation of self-knowledge to a worldly capacity to see practical opportunities.

Which detail(s) does the author provide to support this claim? Check the boxes of all that apply:

☐ A. “...understand who we are as human beings so we can make reasonable choices about...” (par. 2)
☐ B. “... there often seems to be a mismatch between what people choose to learn and the available jobs.” (pa. 3)
☐ C. “In our restructured world of work --... simply seeing the opportunities is hard.” (par. 6)
☐ D. “Human beings are not born complete; we make ourselves over the course of our lives.” (par. 7)

Box 35.5 Find the theme; summarize the text

Task: Students read a short story of 734 words, Grandma Ruth, in which a girl learns that her grandmother was named after a famous baseball star, Babe Ruth.

Writing prompt: What does Naomi learn about Grandma Ruth? Use the space below to provide your answer in not more than three sentences. Use sentences from the text to support your response.

Box 35.6 Elements of performance tasks (writing)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stimulus</th>
<th>Information Processing (during the time provided)</th>
<th>Product/performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Readings</td>
<td>Research questions</td>
<td>Essay, report, story, script, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video clips</td>
<td>Comprehension questions</td>
<td>Speech with/without graphics or other media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio clips</td>
<td>Simulated Internet search</td>
<td>Reponses to embedded constructed response questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphs, charts or other visuals</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research topics/issues/problems</td>
<td>etc.</td>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
or professional, and distant from personal feelings or experiences. CCSS reading and writing tasks are also “beyond the here and now,” considered to be more academic than required with earlier standards.

In her contribution to this volume, Humphrey discusses the literature which surrounds issues of disciplinarity and pedagogies, particularly in the Australian context. So far in the CCSS, there are expectations for use and production of content area texts; but as yet, teachers are not given much assistance. In the CCSS assessments, there has been an effort to integrate disciplinary/content areas into the performance tasks by requiring written products that focus on topics, visuals, and appropriate source types (e.g., primary sources in history), as well as domain-specific vocabulary relevant to the disciplines. But for K-12, scholarly discussions of the nature and values of the texts in the content areas and how they should be approached in the classroom are rare, except among a few experts influenced by SFL theories (e.g., Schleppegrell, 2010, 2012).

It is disappointing that the CCSS experts and practitioners appear to know little of the extensive EAP literature found in professional volumes and journals, such as English for Specific Purposes and Journal of English for Academic Purposes, in which differences among disciplinary discourses relating text structures, the nature of introductions and arguments, and uses of evidence and other features that distinguish disciplinary discourses are discussed at some length. As a result, performance tasks tend to be framed in standard English class genres (e.g., essays, stories) rather than more common texts in the disciplines (e.g., proposals, lab reports, reviews, and critiques; see Carter, 2007).

This absence of scholarly K-12 literature is evident in the recommendations for teaching in the disciplines/content areas which appear to rely on teacher knowledge rather than upon research (Box 35.8).

Related to disciplinary practices is the “privileging of reasoned argument” over other text types in reading and writing in both the Australian and CCSS approaches (see Humphrey, in this volume; e.g., http://achievethecore.org/page/503/common-core-argument-opinion-writing-list-pg). Practitioners, as well as theorists, see problems with this emphasis; for, as

---

**Box 35.7 Performance standards across-the-curriculum**

- **RI.1.8:** *Distinguish among facts, reasoned judgments, opinion or speculation:* “Identify the reasons Clyde Robert Bulls gives in his book *A Tree is to Plant* to support his point about the function of roots in germination.” [1st grade: Science]
- **RI.1.5:** *Analyze and describe the structure of texts:* “Locate key facts or information in Claire Llewellyn’s *Earthworms* by using various text features (headings, table of contents, glossaries) found in the text.” [1st grade: Science]
- **RH.11-12.2 & RH.11-12.9:** *Summary/synthesis:* “Determine the central ideas found in the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Seneca Falls Conference.* Provide a synthesis that makes clear the relationships among the key ideas and details between the two texts.” [11th–12th grade: History]
- **RH.11-12.8:** *Evaluation/Use of Evidence:* “Evaluate the premises of James M. McPherson’s argument regarding why the Northern soldiers fought in the Civil War by corroborating the evidence provided from the letters and diaries of these soldiers with other primary and secondary sources and challenging McPherson’s claims where appropriate.” [11th–12th grade: History]
Humphrey notes, argument’s overuse tends to efface the identity of the writer (Ivan, 1998) and can result in less persuasive argumentation. A central and much-critiqued shared element in the CCSS and the approaches described by Humphrey is the evaluation of school and teacher quality almost exclusively through high stakes assessments based on the standards. Comber (2012), speaking of the Australian context, points out that name and shame tactics employed by government-commissioned reports lead inevitably to ‘teach to the test’ pedagogies. As a result, student writing often becomes abstract, depersonalized, and context reduced. Ryan and Barton (February, 2014, p. 305) argue that the Australian National Assessment Program (NAPLAN) encourages formulaic writing while avoiding the important aspects of student identity and voice. Likewise, in CCSS testing “…reading focuses on what lies within the four corners of a text” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4), not on building students’ relationships with these texts. Teachers and schools are left on their own to entice students to read and write, and to differentiate literacy instruction for second/foreign language students and students with disabilities.

However, when examined more closely, there are some significant differences between recent approaches to literacy in Australia and those countries that look to systemic functional linguistics as their theoretical guide, and those advanced by the CCSS in the United States. Theory and research supporting pedagogies and assessment present a remarkable difference. One only needs to compare this chapter with the one by Humphrey to discover disparities. In contrast to the Australian approach, the Common Core is not solidly based upon theories

---

**Box 35.8 Recommendations for combining disciplinary literacy and CCSS**

(adapted from Zygouris-Coe, 2012, p.44 and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website)

- Build prior knowledge.
- Teach students to pose discipline-specific questions. Teach them how to inquire, write, talk, reflect and represent the critical questions, problems and concepts [of the discipline.]
- Promote classroom reading, writing, listening, speaking and critical thinking using authentic materials [not explained] that support the development of content-specific knowledge.
- Guide students through complex texts using discipline-specific literacy strategies [not explained].
- Use knowledge of text structures and genres [not explained] to predict main and subordinate ideas.
- Teach students text features (graphs, charts, illustrations, headings) and how to construct meaning from them. Map graphic representations against explanations in the text.
- Compare claims and propositions across texts.
- Use norms of reasoning within the discipline (i.e. what counts as evidence) to evaluate claims.
- Analyze the language of each discipline—grammar can help with understanding of vocabulary, complex sentence, and ideas. Help students with identifying and producing “signal” words that can help direct and build meaning.
- Use multiple forms of assessment.

---

Humphrey notes, argument’s overuse tends to efface the identity of the writer (Ivan, 1998) and can result in less persuasive argumentation. A central and much-critiqued shared element in the CCSS and the approaches described by Humphrey is the evaluation of school and teacher quality almost exclusively through high stakes assessments based on the standards. Comber (2012), speaking of the Australian context, points out that name and shame tactics employed by government-commissioned reports lead inevitably to ‘teach to the test’ pedagogies. As a result, student writing often becomes abstract, depersonalized, and context reduced. Ryan and Barton (February, 2014, p. 305) argue that the Australian National Assessment Program (NAPLAN) encourages formulaic writing while avoiding the important aspects of student identity and voice. Likewise, in CCSS testing “…reading focuses on what lies within the four corners of a text” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4), not on building students’ relationships with these texts. Teachers and schools are left on their own to entice students to read and write, and to differentiate literacy instruction for second/foreign language students and students with disabilities.

However, when examined more closely, there are some significant differences between recent approaches to literacy in Australia and those countries that look to systemic functional linguistics as their theoretical guide, and those advanced by the CCSS in the United States. Theory and research supporting pedagogies and assessment present a remarkable difference. One only needs to compare this chapter with the one by Humphrey to discover disparities. In contrast to the Australian approach, the Common Core is not solidly based upon theories
of language or genre but, instead, upon expert consensus about the skills necessary for academic and professional success.

Literacy emphases also vary. Whereas the current Australian approaches appear to focus more on providing a visible pedagogy, particularly for writing in disciplinary genres, in the US, the ACT and National Assessment of Educational Progress’ findings about the importance of reading expository texts have become the central focus of CCSS standards and assessments. CCSS originators argue that

Students who meet the standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding complex [texts]. They actively seek the wide-deep and thoughtful engagement with high quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens world views.

(CCSS/NGA, 2010, p. 3)

Because reading is viewed as central to CCSS, much of the initial development effort that followed standards creation was devoted to defining text complexity, determined to involve both qualitative measures (e.g., meaning, structure, language conventionality, clarity, and knowledge demands) and quantitative ones. The major quantitative measure, “The Lexile Framework,” is very much like the older readability measures such as the Dale-Chall Readability Formula (see Calkins, Ehrenworth & Lehman, 2012, pp. 34–41), but the qualitative measures are quite new. These measures have been applied to a considerable number of recommended grade-appropriate texts which appear in Appendix B of the CCSS official website.

But what about writing? There are a number of genre-based influences upon writing instruction in the United States, including English for specific purposes (Swales & Feak, 2012), principally focusing on graduate and professional text production, and rhetorical genre studies (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010), which has made some inroads on the traditional college freshman composition classroom. Though some popular authors of instructional guides for CCSS (e.g., Dean, 2008; Owocki, 2013) mention a variety of written genres (e.g., blogs, advertisements, diagrams with interpretive narratives), the CCSS standards follow the NAEP’s lead in avoiding the term “genre,” classifying texts in three broad categories: argument/opinion, informative/explanatory writing, and narrative, with the first two becoming more important as the students advance in school.

CCSS writing standards also include effective processes, incorporating technology, and completing research involving multiple sources. In guides, teachers are told that students should be “writing routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes and audience” (quoted in Owocki, 2013, p. xviii).

**Conclusion**

As can be seen from this chapter, there are a number of reasons why the CCSS have been a political hot potato since their inception. The first relates to the long-established states’ rights in developing educational standards. This tradition has led to backlash as some states argue that the federal government, through its incentive funding, has taken from the states their right to educate and assess. Not surprisingly, a few states have already withdrawn from the CCSS project and some politicians seem to be backing away from their initial support (Walters, 2014). Second has been the rapid, and seemingly secretive, manner in which the CCSS were developed by a few individuals. According to Mercedes Schneider, a researcher who published
on Diane Ravitch’s blog (2014), the group of twenty-four people who were central to the preparation of the CCSS are, for the most part, from the assessment community. Few have been classroom teachers and of those, “none have taught in the elementary grades, special education or ESL” (p. 1).

Third, rather than draw from the extensive research about college demands or disciplinary discourses, CCSS rely principally upon the ACT and NAEP test findings as well as upon

…a consensus of knowledgeable experts…using the intellectual resources available to them—research (where there was relevant evidence), best practices (exemplary standards documents from high schools), and experience (and the judgment that comes with it…thus CCSS progressions do not have an elaborate and rich research base to support them.

(Pearson, 2013, p. 4).

The designers admit to these weaknesses, speaking of the standards as a “living document” that can be revised. However, since the standards have already been imposed—and assessed, in some cases—they may be difficult to change.

A fourth factor complicating adoption and acceptance focuses on the assessments. As in the past under No Child Left Behind, teachers and students may again be evaluated principally upon the high stakes CCSS examinations at the end of each academic year. Concern was heightened when a few states began testing in 2013, and the scores were abysmal. In New York, for example, only 30 percent of the students passed; 3 percent of the ESL learners and 5 percent of the disabled received passing scores (Strauss, 2014a). Obviously, assessment tools need to be re-examined. All of this is complicated by the issue of professional development of teachers, particularly those in the content areas who traditionally viewed their job as teaching subject matter, not literacies. David Pearson, one of the nation’s leading reading experts, argues that the mandate for teaching CCSS across the curriculum may be the most difficult to enforce. He cites Shanahan and Shanahan (2008), also nationally-acclaimed reading experts, who point out there is much for content teachers to learn. In addition to the varied nature of texts of all types (visual, oral, print, online) and domain-specific vocabulary and syntax, differences also exist in the ways in which disciplinary experts approach tasks and the “texts” that support them, “reflecting the values, norms, and methods of scholarship within the disciplines” (p. 58). In their research on reading, Shanahan and Shanahan found that university chemists were most interested in “the transformation of information.” As they read, they wrote down formulas or went back and forth from text to chart. Mathematicians read and reread their short texts, explaining that even function words like “the” and “a” are important to a problem posed. Historians were most interested in the biases of the authors: “their purposes were to figure out what story the writer wanted to tell” (Shanahan & Shanahan, p. 50). It appears that from the CCSS instructional guidance found in textbooks and online, these distinctions stemming from disciplinary values and norms have not been made. Again, it becomes the job of the states and districts, and teacher training institutions, to provide the expertise and pedagogies in the content areas relevant to all students. However, there is considerable evidence that

…initial teacher preparation is currently highly uneven…teachers typically have different levels of knowledge and skill for teaching all students…districts and schools must be able to figure out how to design professional development that is useful to diverse teachers and meets their needs.

(Santos, Darling-Hammond & Cheuk, 2010)
Despite these issues and the backlash that the CCSS is causing, there are many schooling experts and state departments of education that continue to embrace the standards. Why is this the case? For the first time in the United States, there had been some agreement among experts, state governors, and departments of education on what skills students need to acquire to be college and career ready (see Murphy, 2014). Though fallible and not yet fully tested (see Kirp, 2014; Ravitch, 2014), the standards are few and clear, aligned vertically from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Finally, since the standards cross curricular boundaries horizontally, they may lead to whole school reforms in which all teachers and administrators are using common vocabulary to improve the literacy and critical thinking skills of all their students (see Caulkins, Ehrenworth & Lehman, 2012, pp. 180–198).

In 2014, Arne Duncan, the US Secretary of Education, said the following:

I believe the Common Core State Standards may prove to be the single greatest thing to happen to public education in America since Brown versus Board of Education.\(^6\)

We'll see. But after all these years of chaotic and uneven state-level standards and testing, it certainly would be beneficial for the United States to have some stability and agreement on what is important to student success.

Further reading

Caulkins, Ehrenworth & Lehman (2012); Pearson (2013); Smith, Appleman & Wilhelm (2014)

Related chapters

3  Academic literacies
15  Systemic functional linguistics and EAP
34  EAP in school settings

Notes

1  In most of North America, “public” schools are government funded. The vast majority of students in North America of all social and economic classes attend public schools, which serve students from kindergarten (age 5) to grade 12 (age 18).
2  See the landmark Supreme Court case, Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) in which it was decided that “race-based segregation of children into ‘separate but equal’ public schools violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and is unconstitutional.”
3  Legislation in 1972 (Title IX) and 1973 (Section 504, Rehabilitation Act) prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender or disability.
4  The fourth item type is called technology enhanced, utilizing the students’ technological abilities in responding to tasks and questions. They require students to drag and drop, highlight, and complete other tasks online.
5  Standard coding: LA = English/language arts, the content domain; 8, the students’ grade; RI = Reading Informational Texts (students also read literature = RL); and 1 refers to the articulated Anchor Standard at this grade level.
6  The Supreme Court Case, Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), mandated desegregation of all schools in the United States.
References


League of Women Voters (n.d.). The history of federal government in public education: Where have we been and how did we get there? www.lwv.org/content/history/federal-government-public-education-where-have-we-been-and-how-did-we-get-here.


