

A COMMON SENSE APPROACH TO COMMON CORE

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David Coleman and his team developed the Common Core State Standards in slightly less than a year (2009 – 2010). Now, that fact begs the question, “How complicated can this be?” In the four years since, education’s mandarins have produced landfills of graphs, charts, curricular documents, reference material, frameworks, and guidelines. Textbook publishers rushed out “old wine in new bottles,” by slapping on labels proclaiming, “Aligned with the Common Core!” But no one has comprehensively piloted this new paradigm for teaching and learning and no one can provide enough longitudinal evidence on the efficacy of any particular approach to it. What has resulted is a plethora of theoretical complexity that too often results in pedagogical overload for administrators and front line teachers.

There are two contradictory realities that should inform our thinking about Common Core. One is education’s continuing obsessive emphasis on the amount of content students are expected to process and recall. For confirmation of this, just skim through any of today’s 800 to 1300 page high school textbooks. Juxtaposed to such an overriding focus on the delivery and retention of information is the reality that acquisition of unlimited content, 24 hours a day, from practically anywhere on the planet has been made possible by technologies and products tied to the Internet. Further, the amount of information (i.e. content) in any subject area is increasing at almost an exponential rate. Soon, technology will not only be able to provide content, but will be able to furnish the answers to questions *about* content. As a result of this instantaneously available capability, knowing how to put content into a productive context will become paramount, far more important than just “knowing” what content is.

According to my reading of Common Core, it appears that the justification for its implementation rests on one overriding, hoped-for outcome - this new framework will develop students’ ability to *think*, not just remember. As I deconstruct what David Coleman and his team has wrought, I believe that the foundation of Common Core rests upon a explicit number of thinking skills represented by about two dozen “key terms” that are cited repeatedly in the fifty-six pages of the English Language Arts Standards. Each of these terms, such as *analyze, evaluate, develop, main idea, infer, theme* and the others are not just Tier 2 vocabulary words (Tier 2 refers to those high frequency, cross-curricular words that are not domain specific), but represent unique cognitive processes required for learning within the structure of Common Core. In addition, understanding what these terms actually *mean* is more important than being able to recite simple definitions. For example, “metaphor” is often defined as, “A comparative not using the words ‘like’ or ‘as.’” However, if you

ask a student, “What does that actually mean?” you will often get a simple shrug of the shoulders. Indeed, “rock is a stone” is a comparative, not a metaphor. The more useful meaning of metaphor can be expressed as, “Understanding one thing in terms of another.” Therefore, metaphor and simile can be thought of as siblings – which is a metaphor. Given the fact that many students come to school with a vocabulary deficit, it is all the more important that they grasp the conceptual basis for each of these crucial terms and the concepts inherent in them.

While the upcoming Common Core aligned assessments such as the PARCC will focus exclusively on passages of text as the content of their tests, application of the thinking skills referenced above is not limited to the written word. “Content,” per se, can be anything. While noting that the following italicized words are some of the “key terms” embedded throughout the Common Core, students can *analyze* a piece of music, *develop* an hypothesis, *interpret* data, *determine* a common *theme* that flows through an historical period, *compare* or *contrast* two images on the same subject, *evaluate* the *claims* made on a website, and so forth. Further, curricular content for the teaching of these skills can also come from the students’ own cultural and social contexts, not being limited to strictly academic material. Proficiency with these skills increases students’ development into competent adults.

Bottom line: Common Core was devised not only as a way to level the pedagogical playing field from state to state, but also to prepare students to grow up as capable citizens in an increasingly complex, globalized 21st century economy and society that will compel them to imagine things that do not yet exist, produce products and methods that matter to someone else, and communicate effectively with people different from themselves. Thus, if teaching through the prism of Common Core is intended to deepen students’ capacity to actually *think* in a variety of ways and if assessments, such as the PARCC, actually measure to what degree this has been attained, perhaps “teaching to the test” could take on a more positive gloss because of its potential for encouraging a greater interest in life-long learning as our children will live in a more dynamic world which will require constant adaptation to new and unfamiliar experiences.