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Engaging with the Common Core

by Kristyn Stierley

Dear teachers engaging with the Common Core,

We can do this. Yes, the Common Core ELA standards have proven to be vastly different from what we were used to. It is as though the deeper we get into the dissection of the Common Core, the more inundated we become with aspects of close textual reading, all the while seemingly losing the human interaction with the text. The strong focus on the text and its structure – not to mention the grammar terms and concepts that we may not have thought about since the nostalgic days of college (if even then) – may seem daunting, but there is hope.

Confronted with the Common Core Standards' shift to more text-focused instruction, we can unite with our colleagues and with our students to help create motivated, self-regulated thinkers, learners, and doers. We can use the Common Core and all of the desired outcomes as a tool. For teachers, it can be a tool to get us talking about the curriculum, about our students, and about our teaching. For students, it can be a tool to get them interacting with the standards in order to better understand their learning. Surely this is an opportunity of which we must take advantage.

The first step in using the Common Core comes in the form of a tool for discussion among the members of our individual departments. It's the third party that can make everyone involved feel more comfortable. It's not about us as teachers; it's about the curriculum and the teaching. In the process of breaking down the standards, teachers can all get on the same page in regards to curriculum. For my department, it was revolutionary. By evaluating the Common Core standard by standard and turning each of them into student-friendly "I Can" statements, we were able to open up a dialogue about not only the standards themselves but about that which we value

as educators. We were able to clear up any misconceptions that we may have had about the Standards, and we were able to be collegial, sharing our work and our activities that may have previously been so private. At this point, we weren't just working to get all teachers on the same page. We were focused around the idea that we wanted ALL students, not just those who sat in the four walls of our individual classrooms, to be successful.

The real fun, however, came from the students' interactions with the standards. Once the Common Core was dissected into student- (and parent-) friendly language, we were able to give students the power to determine their success. They were charged with their learning. The "I Can" statements, derived from the Common Core, became the focus of our time in class. Students understood, at the beginning of each lesson, what was expected of them. It was never a surprise. What we knew as RL.8.1, students saw as two separate "I Can" statements: "I can cite textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly" and "I can cite textual evidence that most strongly supports an inference." Our W.8.1a was further broken down: "I can introduce a claim regarding a topic that has caused a debate in society," "I can acknowledge and distinguish the claim from counterclaims (opposing claims)," and "I can organize the reasons and evidence logically." Separating these dense standards made it easier for students to see the pieces of these individual skills needed for success.

The "I Can" statement that was on the board was not just another decoration, though. It was targeted throughout the lesson as the main point of that day's activities. In one class period, for example, students began the hour by reading the day's "I Can" statement. "I can introduce a posi-

tion in a thesis (claim).” The brainstorming followed. What do we know about a thesis? What is a position? A claim? Once the brainstorming concluded, the lesson continued. Toward the end, a whole-class quick check determined whether or not students were on the right path. On other days, students may have self-assessed to determine where they were on the scale of understanding. In these classes, even without individualized teacher input, students are able to self-regulate and determine for themselves whether or not they are on the right track in their learning.

That’s not to say that teachers shouldn’t ever help students to identify where they stand on the spectrum of each learning target. Quite the contrary. The “I Can” statements can serve as tools for a variety of formative assessments in which teachers and students participate throughout each unit of study. The results of these assessments can be communicated to students who are then able to self-regulate, planning a course for their future success.

Exit slips given at the end of an hour are a great way to get pencil on paper to document a student’s understanding. Once collected and evaluated, exit slips give the teacher a clear picture of students’ progress toward mastering the standard. The next class session can then begin with a re-

view of the exit tickets in order to give students a clear picture of where they stand. Finally, “I Can” statements can give parents a clear picture of exactly what their child needs to do in order to achieve proficiency, because the language of the statements is also parent-friendly.

Is the Common Core perfect? No. But in education, nothing ever is. Without the Common Core, though, this journey of collaboration and of bringing the curriculum to life would never have begun, and I wouldn’t trade where we are now for anything. As an English department, this became our baby. We collaborated, through sweat and tears (or at least it sometimes felt that way!), to bring the Standards to life, and it has revolutionized our teaching. Our department has never been so cohesive, and our students have never been so self-regulated. The Common Core was the springboard for this process of creating “I Can” statements, and now I can’t imagine teaching without them.

—Kristyn Stierley

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