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Amanda Stearns-Pfeiffer

Using Standards as an Opportunity for Teacher Reflection Revisiting the “Best Practices” Debate

In the July 2009 edition of *English Journal*, Peter Smagorinsky and George Hillocks, Jr. published an eye-opening exchange in which they contested the worth of the idea of “best practices” in the teaching of English. What was fascinating about their exchange was that neither wanted to replace “best practice” ideology with something new, and therefore inherently “better.” Instead, Smagorinsky called for a step back to a more traditional mindset, a time when David Schon coined the term “reflective practitioner” (1983). Smagorinsky states, “Through reflective practice a teacher continually considers the effects of instruction on students’ learning, or on whatever other outcomes might be produced through a teaching and learning relationship” (p. 21). The Smagorinsky-Hillocks debate is one that can perhaps never be fully decided upon, and it is not my intention to rehash

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the critical appraisal of “best practice” terminology. It is, however, also fascinating how their debate has sparked, and continues to spark, discussion about the merits of teacher reflection in the classroom. Being a “reflective practitioner,” it seems, is the talk around the proverbial water cooler, especially in terms of meeting state standards.

State Standards as a Catalyst for Reflection

Currently, I’ve been spending time interviewing teachers about their experiences with and attitudes toward state standards. When asked the question, “What do you feel has been beneficial about your experience with adopting the state standards?” the most common answer has been that it allows teachers the opportunity to consider the classroom practices in which they engage in a deeper, more concentrated way than they might otherwise do. Reflecting on the teaching methods, classroom activities, and the texts they choose to read encourages a reflection that many teachers find difficult to make adequate time for. Meeting the state standards, ideally, should force teachers to answer the question “Why am I doing this?” As Smagorinsky states, “Teaching through principled practice challenges teachers to think about what is appropriate given the unique intersection that their classroom provides for their many and varied students; their beliefs about teaching and learning; the materials available for them to use; the professional, and policy contexts in which they teach” (p. 20). Reflective practice requires teachers to not only ask why they are making the pedagogical decisions they are making, but it also requires them to think critically about the specific teaching contexts in which they find themselves. Individual interests of students,

community values, and location are only a few of the possible variables that can influence a teacher’s decision-making.

Best Practice and State Standards: A Recipe for Prescriptive Lists?

In many ways, “best practice” and state-mandated standards are intertwined, inseparable. Before you dismiss that statement as complete irreverence, consider this: standards and “best practice” are both founded on the idea that there exists a researched set of practices or knowledge that are best for all students. Both best practice and state standards suggest that we can somehow mainstream our instruction to be better through efficiency. As Thomas Newkirk (2009) points out, we need to question “the overreaching way that educational research is being used; the false impression so often given that if only teachers would base decisions on established research, the educational result would be so much better” (p. 10). Similarly, both “best practice” and state standards run

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the risk of leading to prescriptive lessons, or a set of skills, methods, practices to accomplish and then “check off” the list. I do not mean to suggest that I don’t believe in a researched set of practices and approaches that are “clearly better than others” (Hillocks, 2009, p. 23). There are many “best practices” that should be practiced often and revisited throughout the school year. For example, we know that by acknowledging the different readings students might have (Louise Rosenblatt introduced us to the concept) students will connect with the literature they read in the classroom more than if we force them to adhere to preformed readings. We know that process writing is more engaging for students and more beneficial for improving their writing than product-oriented writing. We know that teaching grammar in the context of student writing is more beneficial for students than teaching grammar in isolation and relying on rote memorization. These are the best practices that English educators and research have shown to work best with students. Unfortunately, what we know works best for students is not always supported by state-mandated standards and assessments. We also know that curriculum checklists and prescriptive lessons are not an effective way to teach reading and writing. The delicate balance, then, for incorporating “best practices” in the classroom comes with the same warning label that meeting the standards comes with: proceed cautiously and reflect often. What the research has shown to be most productive, most engaging, and most beneficial should not be reduced to prescriptive lessons, just as the standards documents should not be reduced to checklists.

If we adopt any set of practices, approaches, methods, or lessons without feeling a sense of ownership over them, we will damage our teaching. Rebecca Bowers Sipe (2009) writes:

The notion that teachers can simply follow the plans, stay on schedule, and prove that students have learned the essential content others deem important engenders a sense of dissociation from the day-to-day joy of teaching that keeps teachers and students engaged in the vibrancy of learning, replacing it instead with a factory-line approach that has brought questionable results in the past. (p. 5)

There is a palpable lack of passion in lessons that are not chosen by the one conducting the lesson, that have been adopted with the purpose of checking off a to-do list. And while Smagorinsky may have been the first to apply the “checklist problem” to “best practices,” English educators have been arguing against the checklist mentality with standards for years. Checklists can lead to a “teach-it-once-and-be-done-with-it” approach to teaching reading and writing, an approach that runs contrary to the recursive nature of our craft, highlighting the problem that many English educators have with standards-based English curriculum. Take these words written by Arthur Applebee in 1974: “What we seek to do in English is not to add discrete components of skill or knowledge, but gradually to elaborate the

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linguistic and intellectual repertoire of our students, a process that is more fluid than linear, more fortuitous than predictable” (p. 255). Written over three decades ago, Applebee speaks to our current struggle with lists – lists of books, lists of skills to be dominated, lists of goals. Lists can be divided into their individual components and when these individual components are taught independently from one another, there can be a disconnection between the original goal of the standard and the outcome within the classroom (Ohanian, 1999). This creates a problem, however. Many of the processes teachers are asked to utilize in order to “unpack” and interpret today’s standards force teachers to look at the list of standards as individual entities, separate pieces to a puzzle (Webb, et al., 2007). Approaching English language arts state standards and expectations in this way creates an atmosphere of product orientation rather than focusing on the process. Standards are touted as something to be covered and then crossed off the list. This shifts teachers’ focus to something other than highlighting the intertwining nature of language, literature, composition, or communication.

This is, in part, the argument Smagorinsky makes against “best practice,” that the term can be reduced to a list of methods, lessons, and approaches that could be followed and checked off as completed. This approach to lesson planning and to teaching can be as disengaging for teachers (and therefore students) as it is contradictory to how we

know students learn reading and writing skills best: through learning and relearning, trial and error, emphasis and re-emphasis. A checklist system can lead to a fragmented curriculum as described above, and it can also lead to an assembly line approach to education as Sipe (2009) argues:

Educators everywhere must consider carefully the role of standards in curricular planning, and collectively we must avoid being bogged down in an assembly line approach to covering expectations that fails to fully account for the organic and fluid instruction that good teaching represents. Again, standardization and standards are not the same. (p. 43)

Curricular planning requires much more than reading a list of goals, or even a list of “best practices.” Solid curricular planning requires an in-depth look and appraisal of the intricacies of our unique teaching situations; only then will we reach as many students as possible.

Here They Come: the CCSS

As many states are just becoming comfortable with the current set of state English language arts standards, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are at various stages of being implemented. We are all scratching our heads, waiting to see what this “new and improved” set of standards will mean for teachers as they plan for their classes. In the past teachers have been asked to reevaluate what they currently do and make changes in the name of progress. While change can be challenging in a positive and inspiring way, it can also be overwhelming and unproductive. Change for the sake of change is never a good thing, and too often teachers are asked to do just that. Newkirk’s *Holding on to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones* harkens back to the idea of silencing the voice of change and following one’s instinctive instruction when deciding how to deal with change in English education. Newkirk describes what he considers good practices for the classroom. He is careful to point out that none of these “ideas” should be considered prescriptive measures, and that the classroom situation and the students involved should determine the exact lessons used. His ideas are nothing revolutionary: expressive writing, free reading and using popular culture are three examples. Newkirk is also careful to never call these ideas “best practices.” He states, “It is not a form of anti-intellectualism (or laziness) if some of us fail to genuflect before the idol of research – it is a pragmatic analysis of the value and limits of this work. We need to listen to another voice from the early twentieth century, John Dewey, who elaborated his concept of ‘experience’ as a recurring arc of action and reflection, thus honoring the microexperiments of daily life” (Newkirk, 2009, p. 10). Perhaps we can learn from Newkirk’s lessons as we are faced with yet a new set of state standards to interpret and implement. This does not mean that we should feel obligated to copy his, or anyone else’s, ideas and adopt them for ourselves. This means we should decide what really matters in our own classrooms, what really gets students excited about reading and writing, and hold on to those ideas as the new standards are “unpacked” and “rolled out.”

Take a Moment to Reflect

If the past decade of English education trends were summed up into one defining word, that word might indeed be standards. As Newkirk (2009), Carol Jago (2001), Susan Ohanian (2001), and Sipe (2009) all suggest in their separate books on this issue, a standards document that attempts to standardize teaching methods and curriculum does students an injustice by assuming all students learn the same way in the same amount of time. Ohanian (2001) especially takes up argument with those she names “standardistos” (i.e. anyone in favor of standardizing education) in their quest to teacher-proof education. Obviously, this detracts from any reflective practices that teachers might engage in when making curricular decisions for his/her own classroom. Rather than trusting teacher creativity, knowledge, and leadership in the classroom, “standardistos” are in favor of narrowing the meaning of what is best for each classroom. Although some see this reaction to the standards movement as alarmist, it does draw attention to the little autonomy left in curricular planning that many teachers face. Additionally, in *Beyond Standards*, Jago (2001) depicts many specific and sound teaching practices. Never, though, does she claim that all of these lessons would work in every classroom across America. In fact, she gives enough situational details about the students in each classroom and why specific lessons were chosen that her emphasis on reflective teaching is clear.

It is important to note that while these individuals all agree that the standardization of education via the standards is detrimental, some also believe that the standards themselves are not necessarily detrimental. As Newkirk states, “Standards are useful when they do not proliferate, when they can be used to focus instruction and not disperse it. They are useful when they are general enough to allow for extensive teacher decision making” (2009). In fact, some also agree that some sort of standards document (perhaps the standards document published by NCTE outlining 12 important goals for English classes) is probably a necessity. Where the standards, and therefore “best practice,” can go wrong is when we try and create a prescriptive, one-size-fits-all educational doctrine. Relying on standards documents instead of teacher preparation and reflection for the guidance of English curriculum not only detracts from the professionalism of teachers, but it also detracts from educators’ abilities to empower students with the literacies needed. Helping students reach a level of critical literacy is paramount in succeeding as an English teacher; it is difficult to help students with empowerment when teachers are likewise disempowered by the hierarchical educational structure in which they teach.

Perhaps there are potential benefits of a standards document, if that document is written well and if teachers and administrators do not turn the individual parts into shallow concepts that can be checked off a list. And if we identify the goal of that document as being a goal of student success, then we should keep our eyes focused on what helps our students be successful in the classroom as we take on the next set of standards, and ignore the push toward adopting a set of lessons or practices that are disconnected from our students’ interests or needs. The target might keep moving, but the goal remains: meet students where they are and figure out how best to help them. Through reflective practice, we should not only ask ourselves what lessons, practices, or approaches work, but also ask ourselves why

those practices, lessons and approaches work. If we can answer the why question, then we can learn even more about what our students really need from their English classroom. This is where we should begin as we sit down with any “new and improved” standards document; this is how a standards document can improve our teaching and help us use “reflective practice for extending teacher knowledge” (Newkirk, 2009, p. 38). To assume that teachers need to throw all current lessons out and start afresh every time a new set of standards is introduced is analogous to asking a basketball team to learn all new plays because it is a new season. A basketball team would keep the plays that worked, the plays that scored points, and the plays that gave opponents trouble. The same should hold true for the practices in our classrooms that consistently meet a goal, inspire students or otherwise motivate. The standards should meet teachers where they are, not vice versa. Rather than view standards, or even “best practice,” as something that lessens teacher autonomy and inhibits curricular decision-making, perhaps we can begin to view these mandates as opportunities for self-improvement through reflection. If we continually consider and reconsider who our students are, what works for them, and why it works for them, then we are demonstrating a far deeper understanding of our job than any scripted lesson or list can compete with. And perhaps through this reflection, we will find that the unexamined lesson is not worth teaching.

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