4-2014

Making Space for Conversation: The Common Core from Four Perspectives

Marcey Brown

Michael Ketelaar

Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil

Katie Sluiter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Brown, Marcey; Ketelaar, Michael; Rumohr-Voskuil, Gretchen; and Sluiter, Katie (2014) "Making Space for Conversation: The Common Core from Four Perspectives," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 29: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2010>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

PRACTICE

Making Space for Conversation: The Common Core from Four Perspectives

MARCEY BROWN, MICHAEL KETELAAR, GRETCHEN RUMOHR-VOSKUIL, AND KATIE SLUITER

Teachers in Michigan are talking about the Common Core State Standards—in staff meetings, Twitter chats, and professional learning communities. Conversations happen in teaching evaluation meetings with administrators, in places of worship, in parent-teacher conferences, and in conference presentations. They happen as we carpool to work with fellow teachers, as we design common assessments with department members, and as we pack up books and supplies at the end of the school year. These conversations can be internal—imaginary conversations entertaining imaginary possibilities—or external, addressing real situations. In our case, we started talking in a graduate methods course, and continued our conversation informally on Twitter and Facebook, ultimately deciding to document the ways in which we interpret, respond to, and challenge the CCSS in a range of school settings.

We represent an alternative school, a traditional, middle-class school, an urban school, and a small liberal arts college. We teach at-risk, learning disabled, college-bound students; rich, middle-class, and impoverished students. In sharing these varied, personal states-of-affairs, we aim to create space for a variety of opinions regarding CCSS-related mandates, to help others see that we all want to instruct our students in meaningful ways, and to move us toward a common language with which we can advocate for change.

The Reality of the CCSS in Alternative Settings: Michael's Story

The CCSS maintain that a universal set of student proficiency outcomes will raise educational prowess in the United States, hold educational institutes accountable, and mold students into contributing citizens in a global economy. On the surface, this sounds commendable and a worthwhile initiative. I question, however, if the CCSS are realistic and if its implementation is attainable for all students.

I have taught in affluent private and public schools in Michigan in which CCSS expectations drove professional learning community meetings and curriculum discussions. These districts, administrators, and teachers did their best to adhere to these mandates, while keeping what's best for students at the forefront of their minds. And in each case, after hours of professional development, faculty ingenuity, and the long struggle of the educational process, curricula crafted around the CCSS were designed and put into motion.

The corporations behind CCSS believe these standards can be reached at all schools, despite socioeconomic differences, unequal funding, uneven administration, the past experiences of students, and a myriad of other educational variables. In my personal experience, this cannot be further from the truth. In my past experiences in private and public schools, my colleagues and I had our work cut out for us, but we dug in and, for the most part, successfully integrated the CCSS. My role and my viewpoint drastically changed, however, after I began working at an alternative high school.

My intent as I continue is not to rant, complain, hyperbolize, or cry wolf. My aim is to provide a realistic portrayal of CCSS in alternative education and question its relevance and practicality in my setting. My alternative high school is a melting pot for students throughout West Michigan who have struggled in traditional schools with academics, behavior, attendance, and relocation, among other issues. In a district representing over 50 languages and 70 countries, we serve 250 of the most diverse, academically marginalized, and transient students. We are a credit recovery institute that focuses on providing students with a safe, respectful, and engaging environment, with the hopeful goal of graduation. The main pillars of our school are graduation rates, credit recovery opportunities, and a safe learning environment.

These goals are difficult to achieve when considering the CCSS. How might I achieve our school's goals and tackle the CCSS with Trey, a "senior" with 10 credits who has just returned from 50 days in Kent County Jail? What do I do

with Jimmy, who has suffered 10 concussions, suffers from short term memory loss, and only wants to work construction? What about Kam, who is now attending his fifth school in three years, who enters my classroom after a full year away from school? Then there is Myra, who is 16, has two children, and works part-time while suffering from drug addiction. How does Shea show mastery when she works two jobs and has a child at the age of 16?

These students were all in traditional education, and the system failed them. Now they come to our setting, and I am supposed to offer them the same education based on the CCSS. This epitomizes insanity, and it is not what's best for students. Our students did not succeed in traditional settings for many of the above reasons, and I am mandated to continue teaching skills that are identical to those they failed to learn in their previous schools? I think not. If any school faces obstacles implementing the CCSS, then, it is mine.

A short litany of the obstacles we face on any given day includes: terrible attendance (each trimester we have 40 percent of students with 10 or more unexcused absences), inconsistent behavior (over one-third of students are on behavioral plans), underdeveloped literacy skills, a large population of English Language Learners, students under the influence, gang activity, a shortage of textbooks (I have one textbook from 1983), no library, poorly functioning computers, students working multiple jobs, unplanned pregnancies, substance addiction, poor nutrition, broken homes, emotionally and cognitively impaired students, a deficiency in credits earned (at the end of any given trimester, one-third of our students haven't passed any classes and gained credit), criminal activity, and track records of academic failure.

I do not feel it is necessary to elaborate on all the obstacles I face in alternative education, but I will note that as a teacher in a credit recovery school that focuses on graduation, I design my courses very specifically to accommodate student needs. I must develop a curriculum and classroom environment in which students have the ability to work at their own pace, complete material from a range of this courses, and be able to work ahead. A common request from students is "Can I have all the work for this class, so I can just get done?" This is problematic because this voids any direct instructional time. If I am to have a class which allows students to work ahead, how can I incorporate group work, sustained silent reading, speaking, and listening?

Most of our students come to school to socialize, to eat, to obey the law, and/or to learn in a safe environment other than their homes or the streets. I wonder if the masterminds

behind the CCSS took these factors into consideration when they assumed that these standards are accessible no matter the educational circumstances? As a school, our meetings and professional discussions are concerned with getting kids to school, maintaining a safe and disciplined environment, and helping students recover credit to graduate. Most of them will be the first in their families to walk the auditorium stage with a ticket for greater opportunity.

We do our best to focus on CCSS, and our starting point has been constructing "I Can" statements or exit outcomes for all students. For example, posted in my classroom are five primary statements covering language, informational text, literature, writing, and speaking and listening, which drive my instruction based upon CCSS. We are doing our best, but necessity places our focus on relational capacity and accommodating students' diverse needs.

Consider my current third hour class, English 9A and English 9B. I have students just starting both, some working on both, and some completing past work from first trimester (we are now in the third trimester). To complicate matters further, these students might be taking a ninth grade course, but they are actually seniors who have never earned this credit. The real challenge is that we accept students throughout the entire year. For example, I could have five new students starting my class midway through a trimester, and I am expected to have them achieve mastery.

Essentially, I have no two students at the same place in the same course. This makes instruction of the 40-ish standards expected by the CCSS near to impossible. We practice a flipped classroom model: I use a short period of time to teach material, and students use the remaining time to work on that material, while I as teacher facilitate and assist. This means I need to provide a classroom structure that allows for gradual release, giving students time to work in class, and providing them outlets for doing coursework at home. Unlike the traditional setting where the teacher drives instruction, students need to be provided with scaffolding to let them move ahead toward recovery.

After sharing these frustrations, let me clarify by saying I do not hate the CCSS. I do see merit in standards to make sure students are mastering material. I do, however, have reservations when their underlying assumption is that any building with any students can prepare their students by mastering standards. My experiences tell me this is false. It was difficult in traditional settings to accomplish this, and it is impossible in alternative education. I trust the CCSS were created with the best intentions; however, my experiences have shown the

expectations do not take into consideration the realities all teachers face, no matter the grade level or institute. At the end of the day, we can only do our professional best. For me, that means developing relationships with my students and trying to meet their needs. They are many.

The CCSS and Special Education: Marcey's Take

After working many years in corporate America, I became a teacher to address the ignorance I encountered on a daily basis. I thought I could make a difference in the lives of young people before they joined the rat race. However, even after graduating with a special education degree and working hard to acquire a teaching position, I never really thought about educational reform or policy. The only thoughts I had were about finding my dream job, creating the perfect classroom, and influencing and teaching a group of the most special people on earth. Now eight years into the best career I could have imagined, I am happy, but I find that the educational policy—and specifically, the CCSS—plays a much larger role in my teaching than I ever imagined.

Special education teachers know that we must follow the CCSS just like general education teachers. There are some differences though: the CCSS, like the Grade Level Content Expectations, have an extended version for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP). These are known as the Common Core Essential Elements (CCEE), and they are what I use when writing my IEPs. Though it may seem appropriate to have “essential” versus “real” elements for a challenged population, for my teaching style, the type of class I teach, and the group of students I have, I would disagree. I question this system each time I sit down to write an IEP for one of my students. While there are times when I have a student who is functioning at a higher level, the majority of my students fall into another category.

My classroom is labeled a MICI classroom, a class for students with mild cognitive impairments. I teach this group of students in a self-contained classroom, meaning they are with me all day for all subjects, with the exception of one elective class with a general education teacher.

Each day I have to plan lessons and follow a curriculum that meets the needs of my students as a whole, as well as on an individual basis per the IEP. My students have IQ ranges from the mid 30s to the low 70s. With this range of ability, I am planning for students who may not be able to read, as well as for students who might read only a couple of grade levels below their current grade level. Math classes consist of basic

addition or number recognition to beginning algebra. Functional skills, skills that prepare students for post-secondary jobs and work opportunities, is another area that is covered, and can look very different based on the range of abilities for my class.

The CCSS does not consider the majority of my student's abilities and/or their academic and functional needs. When I write an IEP, I have to write at least two goals: one per academic area, and one per functional goals. The functional goals have no guideline to follow and no template, so these goals are simply something that I generate based on the needs of the individual student as well as input from parents and itinerant staff. For the academic goals, I can look to CCSS Essential Elements and/or Extended GLCEs. Occasionally, I find something that is applicable, but even if I find one that is close to meeting the needs of my student, I still have to modify the goal.

The CCSS expectations are given as a sort of “road map” for instruction and serve as the foundation for building the skills needed for success after high school and into college for K-12 students in general education. CCEE are an extension of the expectations but more appropriate for students that may have a learning disability. Some of the CCEE may be appropriate for my students, students in a self-contained cognitively impaired classroom. For the most part though, they are not appropriate. I can only hope that in the future our population of students will be considered and have expectations that align with their post-secondary visions. What would this look like? Goals for functional math skills involving money, time, and scheduling to start with, beyond the current goal for my students to recognize and count coins and dollar bills to \$1000. There are in fact many more skills that are more important than the above mentioned goals.

As for reading, goals for comprehending main ideas and details are great but not relevant for the majority of my students. Goals that pertain to reading and completing written work for applications, resume, on the job training, and functional/survival words within the community or job setting are much more appropriate. More consideration needs to be given to this population of students, as many of them want to be job ready and/or want to learn a trade. We need to provide these students with the tools needed to become productive citizens. Most of their peers are going to graduate with a diploma, pursue a degree, and seek jobs that require a degree. When I follow CCEE, am I preparing students to pick up the “slack” for the positions that are left over, the positions that don't require a degree yet need to be filled?

Quality and Quantity: Katie's Perspective

I've been teaching in my district for thirteen years. It is an urban, high-risk area just outside of Grand Rapids. When I began here, the population was mostly middle working class. The area was powered by many of the industrial plants and businesses. In the past decade, almost all of those plants have shut down and now sit empty. Socioeconomically,

An Alternative High School in Grand Rapids Photo by Rick Treur

the population shifted to a lower working class, and while that change was occurring, Michigan got rid of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test for eleventh grade, and in its place began administering the ACT, Work Keys, and Michigan Merit Exam (MME) tests.

After only a year or two of this testing, our school was classified as failing. We also became a Title I school. Over the past five years, we have made notable strides as we

prioritized literacy in our school and district goals. However, as the CCSS began to roll out, teachers and administrators across the state in districts like ours began to fear that the standards were just too high for our population—that they were unachievable for students like ours.

This year is the first time I have been assigned English 12, and it's coincidentally the first year our English department is fully incorporating the CCSS for English Language Arts into our curriculum, although we have been slowly introducing the standards for the last few years. As a way to get involved in the planning of the personal narrative unit (or what the other teachers were calling the college essay unit), I decided to check out the CCSS for writing and align our unit.

The first thing I did was rename it to the Personal Narrative Unit. While yes, many of the students could use their essay—or a re-worked version of it—as their college application essay, many more students would shut down completely when they heard we were having them write college essays. Many of our students simply won't go on to college. Those students who do apply, mostly apply to the local Community College, which does not require an essay from applicants.

The reality of my teaching location is that many of my students are not in a place financially that they can head off to a traditional four-year college or university right out of high school without scads of scholarships, grants, and/or loans. And for most of those students, they will be the first in their family to attempt college. I knew, however, that each of my students had a story to tell.

The 11-12 CCSS for narrative writing is this: "Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences." Based on this standard, the college essay prompts I was given by another English 12 instructor, and my knowledge of our student population, I began to develop our unit.

I gathered personal narratives written by authors, students, and everyday people. I also found some of my own writing to share since one of the key parts of a narrative is the ability to connect lives over a story. Because it was the beginning of the school year, it was crucial that I begin to find ways to relate to my students and build personal relationships with them. Many of our student population come from transient or combined families. Many live with grandparents, aunts and uncles, or older siblings. Our students crave

connection, attention, and security more than they care about meeting any standards, and before I can expect content mastery, I need to show my students I care about them and their learning.

We read pieces written by witnesses of 9/11, by students telling stories of overcoming obstacles, and by me, about my own struggle with depression and anxiety.

After a week of reading and digging into the structure of telling a personal story, we began drafting. Students chose from among a half-dozen or so prompts from actual college applications: most influential person in your life, a time when you overcame adversity, how belonging to a group (ethnic, religious, etc) has shaped you, and more. Within just a couple days, my email inbox filled with drafts—drafts that made me laugh and weep.

Without having to do much direct teaching, my students were hitting every substandard of the Personal Writing CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.

We spent two weeks writing and revising and conferencing. I gave students time in class because I knew there many did not have the resources outside of the school to work in an atmosphere that encouraged thoughtful writing. In a more affluent school district, teachers may be able to rely on school-distributed iPads or the guarantee that upwards of 95% of students have access to internet at home. We spent almost a month on personal narratives, doing all our work with technology purchased with Title I funds. Coupled with the extreme weather and many days spent closed this year, I have had to cut at least one novel from my year-long English 12 year plan.

My colleagues and I determine our curriculum without much input from administration, the board, or parents. We revisit it each year to decide what common assessments we will give, align as much as we can to the CCSS, and leave the implementation process to each individual teacher. Neither parents nor the community “check in” to see that we are meeting the CCSS, and truthfully, there are teachers who do not invest as much time to align every activity and/or lesson as I do.

The biggest change to our curriculum due to the CCSS is how we assess. Our district pushes for Project Based Learning (PBL) in an effort to make learning more authentic. The writing, language, speaking, and listening standards support this. I feel that quality and quantity is essential in order to prepare my specific population of students for the rigors of college and the demands of the work force. As much as I support the positive changes the CCSS brings to unifying

educational outcomes and raising the standards of what a high school diploma means, I wish they were more flexible to different populations of students, specifically low-income urban districts like mine.

A View From One Finish Line: Gretchen's Reflections

As director of a first year composition (FYC) program at a small, liberal arts college that serves students who enter with IEPs, varying passions and abilities, and students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, including first-generation college students and others from challenging circumstances, I know that I stand at one of the receiving ends of the CCSS-related efforts of legislators, administrators, and teachers like Michael, Marcey and Katie. I also know that the CCSS serves to prepare students for employment and college—for writing in my first year composition classroom as well as discipline-specific writing in their chosen field of study. By all practical standards, then (pun intended), the CCSS serve to prepare students for this pinnacle experience of college writing and/or gainful employment.

The CCSS (2014) initiative site states that “today’s students are preparing to enter a world in which colleges and businesses are demanding more than ever before.” Yet for all this preparation, I should point out that few of my higher education colleagues reference the CCSS or more specifically comment on where it meets their instruction. In fact, I can confidently assert that except for the education department, most of my fellow professors—writing professors or otherwise—know very little about current CCSS guidelines or mandates.

In the program of the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication’s national convention, the CCSS—and its implementation and implications—cannot be found via a thorough keyword search. And though the CCSS was created with college readiness in mind, corestandards.org (2014) credits parents, teachers and “other people” who worked together to create these standards—but not specifically people like me, who interact with, and assess, college-level writers on a daily basis. What would we have to say about college writing? Would we ask for different standards and approaches, given what we’ve observed about the reading and writing habits and abilities of incoming students?

When students enter our FYC classes, they tell us that they haven’t read much (perhaps they read enough to show that they’ve read—enough to write a paper, pass a quiz, or discuss in class), that they’d rather not read something more

than once, that they aren't sure how to annotate texts so as to understand them better, and that they really don't care for reading much at all. Thus, in our FYC faculty meetings, we've devoted significant time learning about how to help students become more skilled, invested, readers. And while my college professor identity appreciates the Standards' emphasis on comprehension, rigor, analysis, and the study of multiple genres, my ever-persistent high school English teacher identity (coupled with my nagging identity as a high school student who managed to coast through nearly every one of her Honors literature classes without reading one required text) persists with these nagging questions: do the standards truly encourage students to choose to read—or choose what they read? Do the standards encourage students to enjoy and invest themselves in what they read, so that they want to dig deeper, learn more, analyze? Do these standards recognize what we all know is true: that enthusiastic, voracious readers of good literature also make strong writers?

I agree with Aaron Barlow (2014), who argues, "If a student comes into my classroom with curiosity piqued by broad exposure to cultural, historical and scientific information and the ability to sit down and read a book with pleasure for an hour at a time, that student will succeed in my class." In fact, some of my current FYC curriculum is devoted to helping students develop this curiosity and sense of pleasure when reading. Furthermore, when high school teachers contact me about ways that they can prepare their current students for the demands of college writing, I never tell them to strengthen their efforts via the CCSS.

Instead, I desire that they develop their own reader identity in front of their students—to read frequently as teachers—to share what they read with their students—and gather pedagogical strength and strategies from Kittle's *Book Love*, Miller's *Book Whisperer*, and Wilhelm, Smith and Franzen's *Reading Unbound* so that their students have the stamina to get through piles of books (and hopefully lengthy college texts), espouse the value of reading, and become better writers as well.

In thinking through each of the above situations—teachers like Michael who serve students in alternative settings, teachers like Marcey in special education classrooms, teachers like Katie in urban environments, and even those like me on college campuses—we are quick to notice how the standards serve and fail our students. Yet while I'm forthcoming in sharing these frustrations with my preservice teachers and the faculty who teach in the FYC program, I'm less apt to mobilize other colleagues at my institution—those teaching

in philosophy, history, foreign language, communications, math, not to mention the sciences.

The CCSS is preparing America's students for the reading and writing that I, as well as my fellow faculty members, will encounter; as a group, we are doing and saying very little about that. The CCSS is preparing America's students for future employers as well, and honestly, I'm not sure what they are saying about that, either. But I know that professors and employers share a collective responsibility to educate themselves about these mandates, cultivate relationships with area schools in order to see with new eyes how students are being prepared under the CCSS, tune in to national conversations about the standards facilitated by all interested parties, and take the time to advocate for more desirable approaches.

Coming Together: Common Threads, Common Questions

Considering how our stories work together, we can arrive at some common reflections:

- School environment—its resources, student population, and priorities—influences our ability to fulfill CCSS requirements. We must continue to advocate for a comprehensive understanding of the many factors that encourage and hinder CCSS implementation.
- It is still up to us to design, align, and implement CCSS requirements in ways that still teach meaningfully. We must keep "meaningful teaching"—helping students use reading and writing to make better lives for themselves and others—at our core if/when we implement the CCSS. We must recognize relationships, and safety, as cornerstones of effective teaching. Regardless, we must share successful teaching strategies often in face-to-face as well as virtual conversations.
- We must think and act beyond the CCSS. We share a collective responsibility for staying current on ethics, mandates, implications, and possibilities beyond the CCSS; we must also share this information with administrators, colleagues, parents, students, employers, professors and legislators. Accepting this responsibility means that we, as citizens and stakeholders in the U.S. education system, commit to thinking critically and demanding more.

- We must value, continue, and widen these conversations. In providing physical and virtual space for dialogue, we affirm its worth. In speaking with each other, we learn that we share collective successes, frustrations, abilities, and passions. Conversation inspires us to examine the ethics of standardized testing and teacher accountability measures. Twitter chats such as #michedchat, #engchat and #elachat, as well as virtual community conversations facilitated by Troy Hicks, can situate our dialogue outside of the teachers' lounge and help us network, share ideas, empathize, and mobilize grass-roots and large-scale advocacy efforts.

Overall, we hope that sharing these perspectives will provide further opportunities for ongoing conversation. May each of our efforts move us closer toward meaningful, ethical, contextual, student-centered teaching as our pedagogical core.

References

Barlow, A. (2014, February 15). Designed for failure: The CCSS State Standards. Retrieved from <http://academeblog.org/2014/02/15/>

What Parents Should Know. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/what-parents-should-know>

Marcey Brown lives in Rockford, Michigan with her husband and three children. She teaches special needs students at Rockford High School.

Michael Ketelaar lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He teaches English and Psychology and coaches golf. He is finishing his M.A. in the Art of Teaching at Aquinas College.

Katie Sluiter lives with her family in Zeeland, Michigan. She teaches composition at Grand Rapids Community College as well as English Language Arts at Wyoming High School.

Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil lives in Zeeland, Michigan with her husband and four young children. She is an associate professor of English and writing program administrator at Aquinas College, where she teaches literature, writing, and language arts methods.