Reflections on Standards

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Abstract

The first part of this reflection compares and contrasts the context of framing of both the National Standards and The Common Core State Standards by looking at purpose, goals, and language of each. The second part of the reflection explains the controversies surrounding the Common Core Standards. The reflection concludes with general observations on Nevada’s attempt to pursue a change in the educational outcomes for the students of its state, by adopting Nevada Academic Content Standards in 2013.
Reflection on Standards

The value of a written document is given by its assessment in light of the purpose it seeks, the efficacy it claims, and the progress it instills, so that the parties involved in devising the document’s framework can ultimately claim to having attained these things. The National Standards for the English Language Arts represent the guidelines, the authority, and the structure of educating youngsters across the nation. And these three characteristics are precisely the reason why a need for them is so valuable. These standards are the pillar of rest and hope for literacy needs to be met, for educational opportunities to be embraced, and for the “shared vision” (NCTE, 1996, p. 4) of nation’s educators to be realized. The pushing of our nation’s students toward a “Race to the Top,” through measures such as “college and career ready standards,” (Strauss, 2014, p. 2) has come to be understood as the Common Core Standards. In response to much controversy surrounding this document “written in stone” (p.7), the state of Nevada has stepped forward with a solution: it adopted NVACS (Nevada Academic Content Standard) in 2013, - a revised content of standards to which changes and editions can be made, ideally. This essay is meant to reflect upon the value of the NCTE document as well as the CCSS one, but also to describe the influence of these Common Core Standards on Nevada’s Academic Content Standards.

The Purpose of NCTE vs. CCSS Standards

This first part of the reflection attempts to contrast National Standards with Common Core Standards, in light of the goals and purpose they aim to achieve in the educational process as well as in light of the ideas sought to be expressed through use of language.

Framework of the documents
Let us start by examining the context of framing the NCTE standards in English Language Arts. These National Standards are intended to serve as guidelines and authority for teaching and language learning and for promoting “high educational expectations for all (NCTE, 1996, p. 4). There is a total of 12 standards described, and they all demand simultaneous consideration. They leave teachers room for creativity in the classroom and for considering their interrelation in a lesson plan. These 12 standards represent a project of the National Council of Teachers of English, a project of intense research on language learning processes, of “consensus growing out of classroom practices” (p.24). Perhaps the sentence that best encapsulates the value of this document in the realm of education is the following, “if standards work, then teachers will recognize their students, themselves, their goals, and their daily endeavors in this document” (p. 24).

In contrast, Common Core Standards come to life as a written document “behind closed doors,” in the absence of “public participation, transparency, or educators” (Strauss, 2014, p.3). They emerge as a response to a negative climate surrounding the educational realm and academic achievement of American students throughout schools. The purpose of CCSS is to hold students accountable for high stakes examinations and teachers accountable for their scores. The dramatic effect of this approach is labeling for students and sanctioning for teachers. It is doubtful for an atmosphere of such pressure to be conducive to positive learning experiences in which students can feel validated and teachers valued. These examinations aim at focusing instructional value on reading and math, to the detriment of other subjects. Whereas the language of the National Standards aims at fusing goals and concepts in simple word arrangements, so as to allow ample “flexibility of good teaching (p. 68), the language of the CCSS document, with its “abstract
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descriptions” (Karp, 2013, p.15), adds no positive value but a sense of urgency which contradicts the pattern of actual learning.

**The Language of National Standards and of Common Core Standards**

The language of the NCTE document is simple to grasp for the reader, and one can clearly see the interrelation between standards, the autonomy that transpires between the lines. The clarity of purpose transpires through the written discourse. On the other hand, CCSS document is written in language that is difficult to decode, complex when contrasted with real-life classroom situations, and time-consuming to navigate through when faced with the obligation to document it as authority behind a lesson plan. Let us examine a few examples from each document. The first national standard establishes the value of reading a “wide variety of print and nonprint texts” in order to “build an understanding of texts, of themselves [students], and of the culture of the United States and the world” (p.27). With this written goal, teachers have extensive autonomy to build upon the reading process as they see fit for the student body, to adhere to the reading needs of specific students, and to choose materials based on their expertise, knowledge, and instructional goals. Moreover, NCTE tells us that context is crucial for reading comprehension, as students understand texts “in a variety of ways, depending on the context” (p.27).

Conversely, Common core advocates close reading in a desire to better equip students for test taking (Ferguson, 2013, 20). While NCTE document strives to transform the reading experience into a life-long yearning one, the Common Core is preoccupied with the “four walls of the text itself” (p.19), turning students away from otherwise a pleasurable activity. The second national standard advocates reading through a “wide range of literature […] to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g. philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human
experience” (NCTE, p. 29). Thus, when it comes to reading material, need more be said? Perhaps dictating that 70% of reading be devoted to informational text while 30% to fiction underlines some form of extrinsic value in the eyes of the Common Core builders, but in terms of true merit, I, for one, am able to see none. Moreover, “teachers are quite capable of making that decision for themselves” (Strauss, p. 6). The word choice of the CCSS document is ambiguous in various instances. For examples, standard W 8.5 dictates that students will be able to accomplish [a task] “with some guidance and support.” Now, what is the value of “some”? Perhaps to frustrate teachers in the process, as they are being held accountable for nothing but test scores. What if a student needs “all,” and not just “some?” What is the value of standard RI 7.6 for a 7th grader when he or she is expected to meet the same standard in 11th or 12th grade, - RI.11-12.6? The concept they are expected to retain is the same one. What changes is the language employed in documenting them, - the fancy words that have the power to render the same idea in abstract garments.

What pierces through the written words of the CCSS document is an arbitrary use of language: under the language standards, 8th graders are expected to employ commas correctly to indicate a pause or a break, while 9th and 10th graders are expected to employ colons correctly when introducing a list. Again, the underlining idea of value comes out. For whom does this document hold intrinsic value, if any? And how are teachers to react when their 12th grader or the ENG 101 college student does not understand the necessary placement of a comma after a dependent clause, if the independent one follows? Scaffolding, patience, and grammar workshops are the only way, and not a checkmark in a manual of standards for learning. What is the value of correct use of comma after a break or pause that is supposed to have been mastered in 8th grade? Can punctuation be broken down in chunks for acquiring mastery at a definite grade
level? The heavy style of language expression, coupled with “inappropriate requirements and levels” for school grades (Strauss, 2013, p. 6), makes this document of no true classroom value beyond putting a stamp on students’ knowledge for the sake of generating scores and a certain sense of alignment. Karp, a Rethinking Schools editors, believes that the value stands in a control game, a “political struggle over who will control education policy” (p.16). Ideological propositions come from people in position of authority, along with measures of implementation that claim to have intrinsic value for the democratic citizenry, in our case, students, who are the ones ultimately caught in the swirl of this “college and career ready” obsession of the Common Core designers.

**Controversies on Standards**

This second part of the reflection is meant to describe the controversies surrounding the Common Core Standards and the move Nevada attempted to pursue in hope of changing educational outcomes for the students of its state. Although I did touch on some of the ethical questions that the CCSS’s purpose and language of the text raises, let us examine closely and specifically, the propositions and goals these standards expect students to achieve. Taking the students out of any context, except the four walls of the text itself, in order to homogenize the learning experience across the nation and to generate test scores compatible nationwide, contribute to a sad and “degenerating sense of nobodiness “ for the student (Ferguson, p.21). That is, reading is expected to turn into a ‘scanning for information’ experience, for the sole purpose of generating scores, - so much for the “complex understanding of texts” that the CCSS document advocates in its introduction, and for which students must learn to be creators, to play with values and assess them, to attack assumptions, to change or fix conceptions. It is precisely these “text-dependent questions,” which Coleman, the designer of the Common Core Standards,
defends, that transforms the learning and reading experience into a money-making campaign to profit his organization (Ferguson, p.20). Taken out of “its entire social and historical context” (p. 20) and confined to the walls of the text itself, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” makes a pretty case for universal love and brotherhood, the kind that is much admired and sung about at family picnics on Sundays.

Furthermore, for a document designed with an aim for educational progress of children, the “lack of any democratic participation” (Strauss, p.5) from real classroom teachers, students, and parents, make it precisely what it denies to be, and that is anti-democratic. Raising the bar for each and every student in the nation and punishing teachers for test scores sounds a bit remote from a democratic value. It simply translates to “trouble” for the run-down schools of poor neighborhoods and for the teachers committed to educate the pupils who belong to this socioeconomic strata of society. What is more, - have any of the members involved with designing the Common Core stopped for just one second to ask the nation’s students if they have the inclination, ability, desire, need or economic means to be or at least aspire to become “college and career ready”? I am talking about the children with special needs, the students who rely on school meals to fulfill a basic need before they can even think of standardized testing, the students who do not have the keenest desire to pursue a college degree, the students who do not meet the language of the standards, and the students who meet these high stakes tests with “shock, anger, tears, and anxiety” (Karp, p.16).

**Influence of CCSS on NVACS**

Teachers cannot but feel chained as they see test scores, but “cannot get any item analysis” and cannot use results for diagnostic purposes, nor for helping students improve any further (Strauss, p. 5). CCSS document does not leave any window for revisions. One would
expect a different foundation for a document meant to instill nationwide educational progress, but “the original writing committee no longer exists. No organization or agency has the authority to revise the standards” (Strauss, p. 6). What we need are standards that “provide ample room for the kinds of innovation and creativity that are essential to teaching and learning” (NCTE, p. 2), which society has moved quite far from in an attempt to race students to the top of the tops.

In 2013, Nevada has adopted Nevada Academic Content Standards in English Language Arts in an attempt to improve educational outcomes for its students. And it achieved quite something of value: the design color is no longer a combination of red and orange, but blue. Nevertheless, worth mentioning is that NVACS allows for changes and revisions to be implemented to its content. But, to make a call for a change and let one’s voice be heard, where does a teacher turn to? Perhaps a written report to the school’s authorities or the school’s campus newspaper might not seem much, but it is quite a bit, and as Karp puts it, “it’s not enough, but it’s a start” (p.17). Real progress is striving to put students back in their own classrooms, in its literal and figurative sense.

**Conclusion**

A document framed with a critical and ethical eye to the subjects it aims to protect and intellectually uplift should be open to criticism and provide effective measures of improvement. This is Strauss’s view on what makes a society good: allowing power to be open to criticism (p. 8). NCTE Standards for ELA have shown us a model to follow in educating our nation’s students. Common Core Standards have shown us that unless goals and expectations underlined are met successfully across the nation’s schools, the value of a written document is measured in fast-paced instruction to meet demands of standard testing, pressure that takes teachers away from authentic teaching, and frustration that alienates students from experiencing true learning.
Nevada Academic Content Standards document aims to gap the bridge between the Abyss of the CCSS and the Eden of NCTE. Let enough voices be heard, and the potential amendments that could be brought to this document would change educational perspectives for the better.
References


