

Considering *the* Crossroads



By Gretchen Owocki

Setting a Course to Maximize the Potential of CCSS

Everywhere we turn, conversations about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) abound. National conferences are providing sessions, state departments are holding meetings, books and journal articles are being published, blogs are buzzing, websites are popping up, and teachers are talking. For the first time ever, schools across the United States are expected to use a common set of literacy standards to guide their assessment and instruction—and educators and school leaders are grappling with the implications.

Many are examining their existing practices in light of the new standards and considering whether curricular and instructional overhauls are in order. They are analyzing how the new standards align with the existing standards, and sorting out which of the new elements might need their attention first. Others are wondering what the new standardized assessments will look like, and how those should or should not impact their planning. Some educators are concerned that new standards—regardless of how we use them—may not have much positive impact on student learning: after all, good teaching is good teaching regardless of the standards we have. And some fear that because standards are linked with standardized testing, teachers will feel compelled to place an emphasis on a narrow set of measurable competencies at the expense of broadly meaningful teaching. Clearly, the issues are complex.

Within such complexity, we could approach the adoption of the standards in a number of ways. One option would be to sit tight until we have more information regarding what the new standardized assessments will look like, or until we know what our state offices will be recommending regarding curriculum development. But many local teams are already making decisions based on the core. And watching from the sidelines would imply that we have nothing to contribute.

Another option would be to make a quick scramble to teach what we think the standards developers must have intended. Schools could provide professional developmental opportunities and teachers could look for ideas to develop instruction in areas they deem not strong enough. But such efforts don't necessarily involve a system for nurturing a balanced or manageable approach based on solid evidence, planning, and discussion.

A third possibility would be to search for curricular programs that advertise “comprehensive” and “research-based” ways to meet the CCSS. However, research has confirmed that the teacher—not the program—is the most important variable in student achievement (Brown 2010–2011).

At the crossroads created by the CCSS, there are many paths that schools could take. I suggest that chosen paths be paved with fresh and critical conversations about teaching and learning. As we shape the new system and work within it, we must not lose sight of meaningful teaching and learning. There are concerns that CCSS progression might be too narrow, too prescriptive, and too detached from life in schools to allow for a positive impact. After all, meaningful teaching can only take shape in response to real children in real classrooms. So from the start we must *take hold* of these standards, *use them as a guide* rather than a formula, and *supplement* them, all in ways that have research support and that maintain students' engagement and

deep learning. Within the new system, we can still provide opportunities for students to participate in multiple forms of reading in multiple text environments. We can still offer them choice, and opportunities to experience the pleasure of reading text they see as good. We need not let standards or standardized testing take control of what we do well in classrooms or compel us to change our teaching so that students spend their days practicing for tests, studying isolated skills, or sitting hunched over piles of work.

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As we consider the new standards, the time is ripe for improvement. The time is ripe to consider ways to shift and alter our practices, and to weed out practices that are not conducive to meaningful learning. More than ever, we must find ways to connect students with texts that they can read, and that motivate them to want to read more. We must hone in on carefully selected formative assessments that allow us to understand what each child needs in order to grow as a reader. We must do away with time-consuming daily assessments that offer little insight for instruction. And we must take the responsibility of differentiating our instruction to ensure that each student receives well-tailored, responsive support. Standards CAN do some positive things, but it will be up to educators to set the course.

References

Brown, T. 2010–2011. “Learning to Read: The Unofficial Scripts of Succeeders and Strugglers.” *The Reading Teacher* 64(4): 267–271.

For more than 15 years, **Gretchen Owocki** has helped teachers find researched-based practices that improve learning by letting students experience curriculum as part of their own development. In popular Heinemann titles like *The RTI Daily Planning Book, K–6*, *Comprehension, Make Way for Literacy*, and *Time for Literacy Centers*, she has shared teaching that engages students through authentic, meaningful tasks and challenges them to grow as readers. Gretchen's latest Heinemann book, *The Common Core Lesson Book, K–5*, informs this article and is set to release in 2012. A professor at Saginaw Valley State University, Gretchen is also a Heinemann PD presenter.



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