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The Secondary Desk: An Alternative to Yogi Berra's "It's like deja vu all over again"

Peter R. Thacker

University of Portland, thacker@up.edu

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Secondary Reading

**Peter Thacker,
Chair**



An Alternative to Yogi Berra's "It's like déjà vu all over again."

It feels like the verdict is already in. While State Departments of Education move forward at breakneck speed towards Common Core Standards, opposition pops up from every corner of the country and every political shade. In Oregon, even when cautioned to go slow our State Superintendent of Instruction insists that results of schools using Smarter-Balance tests will be published when we are still developing, truly piloting, these assessments. Why does this take me back to Norma Paulus's bull-headed insistence on moving forward with the expectation that all sophomore students would pass the Certificate of Initial Mastery the next year when she had data in hand that only 15% of Oregon's students were doing so the year before? We know the ultimate outcome. So much work spent on an initiative that from the beginning was doomed. This is not to say that certain strong practices weren't built during its development, but because it wasn't implemented incrementally, revising as we found the need and leaving the public school-by-school reporting until fully integrated into teaching and learning K-12, it failed.

I want to learn from our zealotry of the past. I happen to think that the CCSS have real potential for moving students from looking for the right answer, the answer already known by their teachers, to exploring the range of possibility in every subject. But to get there we need to build capacity in teachers as well as students. The premises of the Common Core are radically different from the way most teachers have been taught/are teaching. My colleagues, Rich Christen, Matt Karlsen, and I found this when doing three years of professional development in SW Washington through a Teaching American History federal grant several years ago. What worked in that setting was treating teachers as professionals working collaboratively to build, teach, then revise lessons through lesson study. Was it sustained enough to impact all of our teachers? No. Did teachers feel like they were growing as professionals and historians? Yes. Would a sustained collaborative exercise in learning how to use primary texts and integrate varied viewpoints have had the potential to do so were it to be implemented across a whole district? Yes.

An instructive

I believe that we can better our educational system. I believe that students can learn to read primary and secondary sources from a variety of viewpoints, learning to extract and cite useful information to create arguments. I've seen it done in an everyday third grade classroom in a most impressive debate on colonialism during the American revolution during lesson study. I reported just last spring on a middle school classroom in which students were eagerly involved in employing the same skills when examining primary source data from the Mt. St. Helens eruption. When students have learned the skills necessary for gathering and evaluating evidence as these seventh graders had through the reinforcement of, *(continued on page 19)*

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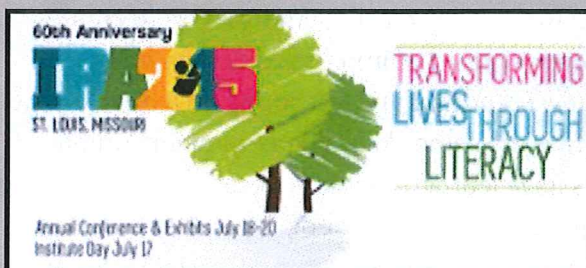


in this case, AVID strategies, they can use them, especially when the information they are examining is compelling. Over time, students learn to read academic texts more distant from their experience and interest with the same closeness. So concerted efforts that honor teachers as both experts and learners can produce results. AVID and lesson study are examples of approaches that build this deeper teacher expertise.

A compelling article in the New York Times Magazine , (*New Math*) – (*New Teaching*) = *Failure* (July 27,2014), suggests that U.S. teachers have not been taught in their own schooling and university training to think in the way the Common Core mathematics tasks demand. In Japan, teacher candidates began to be taught “to encourage passionate discussions among children so that they would come to uncover math’s procedures, properties, and proofs for themselves.”

Ironically, the idea for this change in teaching mathematics had come from the United States’ own math teachers’ professional organization, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. These recommendations were taken seriously in the U.S. in some schools and classrooms in the late 1980’s through early 90’s. I remember observing and being heartened in one of those classrooms at Grant High School when it was the magnet school for math and science. Students in table groups were actively exploring and debating different approaches to posed problems. The approach did not have sticking power here, but in Japan, where memorization had been the main way math was taught, a U.S. trained teacher returned and convinced the nation to re-teach teachers how to use this inquiry model. Through lesson study, the teacher collaboration/staff development model used throughout the country, teachers re-learned how to teach math as inquiry with great success. The article suggests that we will need a similar initiative here, if we expect the Common Core to be more than a passing fancy.

There are professional development models to help us teachers to teach towards new goals. But they rely on teacher buy-in and collaboration. Teachers need to be seen as professionals able to re-think their practice when it makes sense to do so. This gets done by quiet, thoughtful leadership, not through dragging “failing” schools through the media. No more Yogi Berra deja-vu all over again. Whether you are a teacher, administrator, union official, professor, DOE specialist, TOSA, legislator, superintendent, parent or student , please encourage Superintendent Saxton to pull back and allow the time for us professionals to learn together to build towards ever stronger practice. Let’s create a five-year plan. Let’s continue our training for smart educational practice across the disciplines. But let’s work together towards the goals of the Common Core.



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