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The Secondary Desk: Teacher-Mediated Interaction with CCSS

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THE SECONDARY DESK

**Peter Thacker, University of Portland,
Chair**



Teacher-Mediated Interaction with CCSS

In my last column, I noted that this column would continue my discussion of using CCSS as guidelines, not mandates by speaking to the importance of teacher control of implementation of the standards. We are in an age of top-down mandates, many of which have failed. These mandates have had short shelf lives because they were ill conceived. Note both our local Certificate of Initial Mastery and our national boondoggle NCLB. Too much, too quickly AND too draconian, these measures.

I suspect to some extent that CCSS is a reaction to the mindlessness encouraged by America Reads “teacher-proof,” scripted materials that teach the basics but leave out the joy of learning, the problem-solving, the artistry, the student inquiry. We were becoming too robotic. Students were not learning to read and write like scholars, sometimes in middle school spending too much time doing four-square paragraph outlines instead of writing authentic texts. But, in reaction, now to require teachers to use only materials at or above grade level? To accent rigor, rather than Joanne Yatvin’s lovely term vigor? Students are to learn through meaningful inquiry. Inquiry may be the intention of those implementing the CCSS, but the method of implementation is counter-productive and the force-feeding of CCSS is mistaken.

How do we encourage teacher-initiative in building more thoughtful student inquiry? First let’s remember that teachers are inquirers, too. Teaching requires a constant interaction between what we’ve planned and what we see happening in the classroom. We are always reading our students at the same time we are getting them involved in the task at hand. This is where we as teachers can work together in building strong, vigorous lessons that ask students to think, synthesize, analyze, imagine, and create. It is here that we work with students not only to build the skills the CCSS ask for, but others that lead to a hunger for lifelong learning as well.

We teachers have been working with various models of Professional Learning Communities for a dozen years or more. Sometimes these initiatives have been self-initiated, sometimes mandated by others. But whether we have done Critical Friends Groups, Lesson Study, or another PLC model, we have learned to work together, taking note of how to better our work through examining classroom conversation and student work. As we have shared ideas with one another, we have gained skill in revising our lessons to meet students where they are through modeling, scaffolding, a variety of readings, and student-to-student interaction. We can certainly be visited from time to time by experts providing new ideas, but the onus of the work must be done colleague-to-colleague, school-to-school, by the people who understand the context in which we are working. We need to be able to propose the appropriate readings, and writing activities for our students. And it is a dance, not a logical step-by-step process built and evaluated by “Those Who Know.” It is a rather a combination of Art and Science, one that real conversations with peers can fuel. Collaboration, not acquiescence.

Sharing can begin in school-based teams, both in and across grade levels. It can fan out cross-discipline or articulate across elementary, middle, and high school. At the district, it can be coordinated by district language arts specialists, soliciting thoughtful lessons shared school-to-school in district-supported, in-house mini-conferences on professional development days. A model for this kind of sharing existed *(continued on next page)*



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in Portland Public Schools during Linda Christensen's tenure as our specialist. Teachers pushing one another to create thoughtful lessons and receiving feedback that propels them further. The goals are clear, but the choices to get there are specific to the populations being served.

Our expectations are that all children grow and that those who have struggled grow at a faster pace than those at or exceeding grade level. But the measure is sustained growth, not everyone reaching a standard that ratchets up every five years, while those who don't teach re-set unrealistic standards. The Oregonian recently reported that 90% of ESL, 80% of SPED, and 60% of African-American entering seniors are not yet passing the new writing sample required to gain a diploma. Are we really going to deny diplomas to this many students next year? Does this statistic truly suggest that we are failing students? Where is the appreciation for young people's potential? Mandates undo good teaching; guidelines help teachers and students to grow.



Letters About Literature

Encourage Your Students to Participate in Letters About Literature

A Writing Contest Co-sponsored by ORA

Letters About Literature is a national reading and writing contest sponsored by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress (LOC) and by Oregon's equivalent at the State Library. Students write letters to any author explaining how that author's book changed their way of thinking about the world or themselves.

The LOC asks teachers to allow students to choose a book that is meaningful to them and asks students to explain ***why*** or ***how*** the book was significant to them instead of summarizing the plot. The focus of a participant's letter is to make clear the connection one has with a book.

There are three competition levels: Level I for 4th-6th graders, Level II for 7th-8th graders, and Level III for 9th-12th graders. Note that high school juniors and seniors may participate, which was not true last year because of national program funding limitations. Oregon's three winners – one from each competition level – will go on to compete nationally.

[Entry forms and guidelines](#) are available online. All Level III entries must be postmarked by December 10, 2013 and Level I and Level II entries by January 10, 2014.

For more information, please visit the [website](#) or email [Jennifer Maurer](#) at the State Library.