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The Personal Creed Project: Portal to Deepened Learning

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All of us share through our culture and bear within us a deader, less evolved aspect of being that calcifies because it is still mineral or vegetates because it is still plantlike or preys because it is still animal, all while the human aspect of the self works toward its partly divined divinity. This sludgier element of individuals settles out in society as sedimentary attitudes and institutions that mire down efforts to better ourselves.

Moffett, “Confessions” (4)

James Moffett’s 1980 “Confessions of an Ex-College Freshman” first came across my radar in graduate school during the mid-90s. Champion of the student-centered approach that guided my first eight years teaching, Moffett gave a generation of teachers a green light during the watershed late 80s—early 90s. It is difficult to overlay the excitement of entering the teaching profession at a moment when the Soviet empire was collapsing, the Berlin wall toppling, and the Clinton years bubbling into being. The awakened insights into learning and teaching, the expanded view of the universe in which Moffett’s ideas and practices unfolded in his later books, seemed to fit the shifts of the time. They certainly fit my own spiritual journey. Though I never met Moffett, I felt in his writings a vote of confidence, an invitation, permission to launch my career as a valued participant in a coming transformation. Happening across this passage during a leave from teaching to attend graduate school, I was electrified at its originality, delighted by the truth made familiar in its language.

Fifteen years earlier, the period when Moffett had written “Confessions,” the chilliest depths of the Cold War were just ahead. Few in the 80s could fathom, much less see, significant progress toward even a “partly divined divinity.” As the 80s wore on and government rewarded big business with tax and profit advantages, education’s deeper, spiritual evolution stalled. Not until the early 90s, after years of what Moffett might have seen as a coagulation of our sludgier element, did we finally see progress ahead. New teachers could perceive Moffett harmonizing with what, at times, really did seem a new world coming. Emboldened with the ideas that Moffett and organizations such as AEPL brought out, many of us wanted to unite our students’ development as persons with what they learned in school—a disconnect I had felt painfully as a high-schooler.

In “Confessions,” Moffett dramatizes his early epiphany in the 50s as a college freshman from Jackson, Mississippi, coming to terms with his own stultified notions about how he should present himself in writing. Arriving at Harvard, “an untested freshman fearful of losing a full scholarship by not attaining a B average,” Moffett had been asked to write a theme on “your home town” (1). “Half-convinced that [he] didn’t really belong at Harvard and had only got in by way of some back door carelessly left open,” he took no chances (1). His paper stuck to formulas that had pleased his teachers in high school:

One topic-sentenced paragraph was on sports, one on food, one on night-clubbing, and so on. No chance of the reader getting lost here. No problems of transition, or organization or coherence. The signposts were all there, and the sentences scanned grammatically. But it was atrocious writing. In fact, it wasn’t really writing; it was a

paste-and-scissors job, only collaged inside my head instead of with physical clippings and splicings. (2)

His instructor agreed. “Quite below college demands,” he called it, among other things, and advised him to do it over (1). Moffett did, and managed to write something true to his life and experience—about his real Mississippi hometown this time, not Los Angeles, where his family had only recently moved. His professor helped him divest himself of self-smothering conventions about what makes good writing.

His instructor “knew I was on a trolley headed utterly the wrong way, toward endless suffering, and that only a powerful jolt right at the start would derail me so that I could make it in that course and even perhaps in college generally” (1). In the process of rewriting that paper, Moffett says he

just suddenly changed my whole orientation toward writing. My teacher had said, in effect: “No one wants to read what he knows already or could come out with himself. We read for something new. Write only what you know, or what you have put together for yourself. Make something, don’t just take something.” I had no problem with that. (3)

But now Moffett breaks open the conversation with something especially interesting:

We all live on planes of shallowness and depth all the time and so can shift planes at any moment if someone or something sets us straight. I thought, “Oh, I see. *That’s* how it is. Writing isn’t what I’ve been led to believe. It’s saying what you really think and feel or what you really want to put over.” (3)

Moffett’s freshman comp instructor knocked him from his habitual notions of himself and his place in the world into a deeper awareness. Neither rarified or far off, this deepened state of mind was near enough to be immediately accessible. Over the four following decades, launching one writing adventure or policy initiative after another, Moffett devoted his long career to helping teachers move beyond the inauthenticity and impersonality that today still pervade writing instruction. Moffett inspired those who could hear him toward a deeper experience of their own lives so they could then guide the rising generation to a more authentic, more personal and, as he would say openly toward the end of his life, a more awakened consciousness.

In our own consciousness today, 20 years after I read Moffett in graduate school, 35 years after he sounded his note on partly divined divinity, we find ourselves in an era of mandated racing to the top. The struggle against retrogressive sediment in our culture and classrooms is as profound and dire today as at any time in history. The only way to the “top” is through the deepest, least meaningful sludge. Profiteering business and government forces controlling American classrooms with standardized test scores, sedimentary attitudes and institutions prevail. So rarely are students today asked to write to discover something genuine about themselves that regularly assigned reflection is a shock to their systems.

Last year, after the first few weekly reflective writings of the Personal Creed Project that I explore below, a student of mine wondered with wary irony, “Is this even legal curriculum?”

What we need today, more than anything, is a professional understanding of depth, a new platform from which to re-orient and anchor our teaching and our students’ learning. This new understanding must do for us today what Moffett’s freshman comp

instructor did for him then. For 25 years, Moffett's green light has given me permission to think about these things, often subconsciously, while I experiment, observe, and think some more.

Development of the Personal Creed Project

I began developing the Personal Creed Project in 1988-89, my second year teaching, my first with sophomores. Early in the year, bantering one day at lunch with my sophomore student who was a Russian immigrant, I suggested a far-fetched solution to an unremembered dilemma he had brought me. "But Mr. Creger," he protested in his eloquent accent: "That would not be in step with my creed" (Creger 24). A 16 year-old—one recently arrived from the chaos of the rapidly collapsing Soviet Union—had a *creed*? Did other sophomores? Did *I* have one? What did it mean to have a creed? Could sophomores find them? Could I help them? My grey matter was branded with the word, and my curiosity was launching questions. By the end of the year, I had launched a pilot of the Personal Creed Project.

The previous year, I had so enjoyed the freshmen class I had been given that when I discovered I could request to teach them as sophomores, I jumped at the chance. I would realize in coming years that something profound happens in the developmental window between the ages of 15 and 16. As the sophomore year unfolds, new capacities enable them—suddenly—to see themselves and the world from perspectives that take them beyond themselves. They develop new, powerful facilities of *reflection*. These growing abilities set them far apart from the freshmen they once were. I began to notice the striking changes as I observed students responding to the Personal Creed Project.

As I'll document below, the Creed Project generates a rare, lasting, and often amazing enthusiasm in students everywhere along the so-called achievement gap—from brilliantly successful to hopelessly failing. For 25 years, I have documented and tried to understand the sources of this enthusiasm. One explanation that has suggested itself is the social environment in which the project has been conceived and developed. In shaping the project, I have been guided by insight and inspiration from my relationships with over 100 classes, containing more than 3,000 young people at just the time when they are discovering new powers to reflect on what matters in their lives and in the world. Shaped by all this dramatic development, the project provides them a natural and welcome opportunity to revel in their new capacities. This past April, at the end of her Creed Project reflections, an honors student wrote:

Through this huge self-reflection project, I have learned more concretely about who I am and what my purpose is in life. I didn't realize how much all of my influences shaped who I am today. And I didn't realize I value certain things so much. It has helped me learn and grow and mature as I shaped my identity and thought deeply about my values. It has been truly eye-opening and has shown me how different I am now than I was even just a year ago. I have explored so much through this creed project and it's amazing to see that now, my view of the world and myself is much more focused and solid than it was when I first started this project.

Though this student is especially articulate, her insights and enthusiasm are typical of responses I document every June.

My own sophomore English experience was less than inspiring. Widely appreciated for his effectiveness at browbeating and cajoling under-enthused sophomores into fighting shape for Ivy League colleges, our teacher paced and gesticulated before us, as I tuned out. Daydreaming about the most non-Ivy League world I could imagine, I carved out my future life in the great north woods. Little in school over the next two years offered to rescue me from disgruntled daydreaming. I don't recall the thought of graduation crossing my mind as a serious option. High school had done nothing to help me understand who I was, why I was here, or where I wanted my life to go. After 13 years of "learning," I left the back rows smoldering with a quiet rage at my ignorance of such knowledge. I later found in Walt Whitman's preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

Re-examine all you have been told in school
or church or in any book,
and dismiss whatever insults your own soul.

On the list of places where my soul felt unwelcome, somewhere toward the top was the back row in my late-60s sophomore English class.

I now believe that my revolt first against sophomore English, and then school at large, was touched off by being fed a diet of competition when my developmental fires most needed soul-nourishing. In his final book, *The Universal Schoolhouse*, James Moffett expands on this problem: "Schooling as we know it breeds rigidity and neurosis in the lucky and despair and fury in the unlucky. This is not how a democratic state keeps hale and whole. Years of forced competition for scores and grades have taught that you set yourself up by putting others down, that selfishness and secrecy hold the keys to success" (58).

As I conceived the Personal Creed Project, perhaps the attunement I felt with my sophomores began with an urge to nourish my own disgruntled inner sophomore.

The Project

The Personal Creed Project guides students to reflect on: a) how they came to be the people they are today, b) what they most value at this point, and c) how they wish to develop themselves in the years ahead. Reflecting systematically over a period of weeks (college versions) or months (high school versions), students identify the people and forces that have been the most important influences in shaping their lives in the past. They identify specific values each of their most significant influences inspire them to stand for in the present. They consider qualities they'd like to develop over the coming decade to help them live by the three to five values they have chosen (their personal creeds). And they envision how they want to make a difference in the world or others' lives in the future.

As it has taken root in schools and colleges around the country, the project has developed in a variety of adaptations, which I hope to make available as our Facebook Personal Creed group pulls together a Personal Creed Network in the next few years. In its current state of development, my high school version of the Creed Project comes in three phases and seven steps (Figure 1).

Personal Creed Project Contents—Seven steps in three phases

Discovering my Creed—17 total weekly reflections

Step I: Influences that shape me, six weekly installments

Step II: My short list, two weekly installments

Step III: My most and least valued influences, three weekly installments

Step IV: What I stand for/ draft Creed statement, three weekly installments

Step V: Critique of drafted Creed/ revised statement, three weekly installments

Sharing my Creed—Two weeks of presentations

Step VI: Personal Creed presentation—four elements of presentation:

- 1) My main influences
- 2) The values I stand for (my Personal Creed)
- 3) Qualities to develop in myself over the next 10 years
- 4) The difference I want to make in the world

Living my Creed—Time commitment varies

Step VII: Research, goals, volunteering

- 1) Creed-related team research project
- 2) Living my Creed goal-setting chart
- 3) Query letter on Creed-related volunteering

Figure 1: Personal Creed Project Contents

These seven moves appear to enable sophomores to activate their naturally unfolding capacities to become conscious of the forces that have shaped them, understand who they are in the world, and establish an initial set of values to enhance their potential for a satisfying and fulfilling future.

Students' enthusiasm for the project heightens with Step VI, the Personal Creed Presentation. In each school or college that has used the project, these presentations have become a major classroom rite of passage. Each student stands in turn before her class with an original poster, collage, painting, song, poem, film, technological production, or other creation and presents her personal creed. A Creed Presentation covers four elements:

- 1) The key forces and people that have influenced the student
- 2) The values the student has embraced
- 3) The qualities the student wants to develop in herself over the next ten years, to live out her creed
- 4) The ways in which the student would like to make a difference in others' lives and the world

The five to ten-minute Creed presentations have a profound impact on most students. Long weeks of personal reflection become public. In an atmosphere of trust, students to come to terms with the effects of sharing such personal aims with their classmates and teacher. Very often, the presentations become a defining moment in the students' lives. This moment can be especially transformative for failing students. Perhaps because they must travel the greatest intellectual and emotional distance to become enthused over a school project, they often become its staunchest advocates.

Failing all his classes, one such student had no hope of passing my class, or avoiding continuation school the following year. Still, his rows in my spring gradebook, while mostly blank, showed a respectable score for each Creed Project entry. After his presentation—before he left for continuation school—this student wrote in his course evaluation:

The creed project has helped me find out things about myself that I would have never known before. At first, I thought that this project was going to be the same stupid work that had to do with learning and school, but after I started getting into it I was so infatuated with this creed project. This project allowed me to experience deeper thoughts and explorations of my mind and soul. I found out things about my family and friends that all of a sudden appeared in my head . . . This project was tough at times to understand but paid off in the end. (Creger 81)

My growing collection of such statements from failing students is the most persuasive documentation of the project's power to help them gain a sense of control over their difficult lives. Over the years, most students take these presentations as seriously as any traditional rite of passage. Another key reason these presentations make such an impact is that this is the first time students have learned so much about classmates and even the friends they may have assumed they knew well. In her end-of-year portfolio, an honors student described what mattered to her:

Watching all the incredible presentations before mine, I knew I owed it to myself and the class to deliver something that came from the heart. But what I didn't expect was the impact of other people's stories influencing and also shaping me as much as what I placed on the screen. This project wasn't just about finding my story, but the story of each individual in the class, all our voices, our tears, and our lives intertwining to create a bond that is priceless.

In my classroom and at schools and colleges around the country where colleagues are adapting the project, hopelessly failing students, brilliantly successful ones, and average students alike regard the weeks of these presentations at least as a significant rite of passage. Often students report the Creed presentations as the most meaningful learning experience of their school careers. Another student sets the experience in context:

Everyone is just so lost with trying to get that A grade in their classes and get more social points by updating statuses and pictures online, but the creed really gave us a chance to think about ourselves for once. To me, the creed was about imagining a world with only yourself in it. No one else, just you. Put a veil over yourself and hear no one but your own thoughts. What would you then make of this world? We all succumb so easily to the traditional lifestyle we all live: school, work, job. What if there is more to life than just that?

If the presentations—and the project itself—seem to make a deep impression, they also appear to make a lasting one. Two emails from former students now in their twenties recently came out of the blue, the first in the fall of 2012. Hoping to make a significant career change and enter the Navy Seals, one of them asked me to send him the latest Creed Project instructions so he could make his best decisions for his future during this period. Besides, he wrote, nine years earlier as one of my sophomores, he hadn't given the project his best. The following fall, another former student emailed to say that in the midst of her own direction changing she had bought my book, used it to "update my creed," and moved more confidently in her new direction.

The project also is well-established in several universities. A student of a colleague at American University in Washington, D.C. ran the project in her freshman composition classes for over a decade. She wrote: "The problem for me was that I could have, conceivably, spent an entire semester on this project. I was frustrated by the time constraints because I don't feel as though I was able to fully express the nuance and circumstantial reality of my views."

In *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom*, Bruce Novak notes that through this project, his students "became real to one another in ways many of them never suspected they could before" (194). In the fall of 2012, Bruce emailed me a comment from one of his students: "I now realize that you cannot judge others before hearing what they have gone through. And after hearing what they have gone through, you still cannot judge them. All you can do is love them for who they are" (194).

Larger Realizations

If for students, this project serves as a rite of passage, for me the observations, the harvest of portfolio reflections, course evaluations, and other writing serve as a continuing passage in my own understanding of the nature and purposes of learning. For my students, the Creed Project is the centerpiece of the course's emphasis on self-discovery. For me, my 20-some-year experience with the project also has become a window into certain larger realizations about the nature of learning.

I had the opportunity a few years ago to write a guidebook for educators on the Creed Project. But I found it impossible to begin a book about such learning, without a clear sense of a central purpose for the whole enterprise. What was the main purpose or purposes of learning? No class, seminar, or conversation in twenty-some classroom years of college courses and seminars, workshops and teaching had provided me an answer. What are the most fundamental reasons why human beings learn? No one I knew of was asking these questions. I set out, reading and thinking, meditating and brainstorming with anyone who would join me.

In recent years, I've experimented with sharing the model I've developed with my students. At a point in the year when it seems to fit (in honors classes during our study of the various theories involved in *Crime and Punishment*), I simply project an image of the model on a screen and ask for volunteers to attempt to explain what the model is saying. It's never long before someone suggests that the model is a critique of our current approach to learning in school. "Excellent!" I'll exclaim. "So what's the critique?"

One student offered, "It seems to be saying that most of what we do in school is memorizing facts." Some teachers and programs, of course, do take students beyond

such material, factual recall, to construe various kinds of meanings—including emotional, musical, and artistic meanings, as well as logic. While social studies, math and science instructors teach students techniques of historical, mathematical and scientific analysis, art and music teachers expect them to gain the skills of aesthetic critique. English teachers guide students in textual and other sorts of analyses. These skills belong to the intellectual world. See Figure 2:



Figure 2: Model of Deepened Learning

But my students report that across the board the amount of time they are expected to give to thoughtful analysis and interpretation is comparatively small. Their impression, however unfair to their teachers, is that the majority of their time in school is spent

memorizing, recalling, and being tested on facts. This impression does not generate commitment or engagement, let alone a deep enthusiasm for learning. Maybe Common Core State Standards, establishing what Lucy Calkins, et. al. call a “thinking curriculum,” will expand the moorings of American education in the direction of the “What does it mean?” hub (9).

But from the perspective of what I call deepened learning, even courses and programs which afford students rich practice with analysis and synthesis—guiding them to develop facility in drawing inferences from their understanding of a discipline’s facts—address only two of the three hubs in the Learning Continuum. On Figure 2, you can see that the third hub, *Discovering Values*, does not serve as a fundamental part of such courses and programs. Those who feel moved to think of such things might envision this region as our current frontier in education. This frontier progressively leads students to discover who they are and what they value, or stand for, in relation to the rest of their learning. In this frontier, learning becomes relevant through the experience of depth.

It’s not as if we never discover something deep or important about ourselves from the occasional reflection we do in English, or the ethical questions we consider in social or environmental science, or the logical challenges we pose in math, or the aesthetic sensibilities we discover in the arts. And certainly, students develop from their interactions and relationships with classmates and teachers in and beyond class. But rarely does a school community prove to students that it truly values the learning about who we are: guiding them to discover what they value, what matters to them, what purposes they wish to live for, what kind of people they wish to become, what future they want to create, to envision the difference they want to make in the world. A school community only demonstrates genuine commitment in one way: by setting aside *time* in the curriculum.

Noting the model’s enlargement of font and the foundational positioning of the third hub—*Discovering Values*—students get the point. After studying the model and participating in our conversation, one student wrote to me excitedly, “This model fits my educational experience to a T.” But the model is more than a critique. It describes how we engage reality, through our values.

My studies and life experience have shown me that I actually do experience my life in these three areas. If I am to be a viable human being who survives with a chance to thrive more than a few decades, I must devote a significant amount of my energy and attention to ascertaining the facts of my life, of others’ lives, and facts about the world and universe. *I must learn to master facts.*

If I wish to be a successful human being, I am wise to develop my physical, intellectual and emotional capacities so I can interpret the facts I have ascertained in a way that makes logical and emotional sense and equips me to make apt choices. *I must learn to construe varieties of meanings.*

And if I am to be a fulfilled human being, I may choose to discern from my collection of facts and my assembly of meanings *what I value*, what *matters most to me*, *what I stand for*. This is the area of my life in which heart, soul, identity, creativity, and a sense of purpose are activated and nourished. Indeed, the essence of wisdom is choosing to live in a way that honors values we have chosen to stand for, such as kindness, compassion, honesty, patience, integrity, gratitude, unselfishness. This is depth in learning.

To reach deeper fulfillment, then, I must integrate a) what I know, with b) how I interpret what I know, with c) what I have discovered I value. This integration of facts, meanings, and values—considered in the light of my past, present, and future—encompasses a much fuller portion of my perceivable experience than I have ever been asked to consider in school.

Why shouldn't my learning, in school and elsewhere, be carried out in the same three areas in which I perceive and experience reality? In life we must learn to master facts, construe meanings, and integrate self-knowledge with the rest of our knowledge and interpretations. Shouldn't learning in school guide students to integrate with their academic learning the facts, meanings, and values that inform their personal lives?

In preparing to write my guidebook on the Personal Creed Project, I realized the project was finally completing for my students the uncompleted process of learning-as-usual-in-school. Centered thoroughly on the third hub of the Learning Continuum—*Discovering Values*—where little concerted activity has occurred in most students' experience of school, the Creed Project allows a kind of synapse to be traversed in students' experience of learning.

This analysis does much to explain the consistent enthusiasm and excitement that seem to emerge from classroom to classroom, high school to college, wherever students experience the Creed Project across the country. How do we make learning work more successfully for more students? How do we recover learning that has been separated from how students perceive and experience reality? How do we design courses and programs so students are consistently learning throughout the continuum: mastering facts, construing meanings, discovering values, all at developmentally appropriate levels? A workable curriculum must include plans for weaving depth—the progressive discovery of what students' life experience is teaching them to value—into learning at every grade level and discipline. It's not a complex notion.

Figure 3 shows the cross section of an English curriculum that follows from this model of deepened learning.

When I introduce my workshop for educators, I ask participants bluntly, "So are academic skills in English important?" Understandably, they often stare blankly a few moments. Nods begin bobbing around the room. Then I ask, "Are skills at the CENTER of what we do in English?" More quickly this time, a few heads wag sideways. If skills don't belong in the center of what we do in English, where do they belong? In deepened learning, skills are a means to the end of students' unfolding. Students who realize themselves more fully become citizens who are more committed, employees who are more productive, family members who are more loving—and students who are more successful. So skills belong at the edges of the curriculum. So far, colleagues seem convinced of this relation between skills and students. But where does literature belong?

Literature is a great facilitator. As we learn to understand and appreciate literature, we can focus on and develop higher and higher levels of reading, writing, thinking, and conversation skills. And we can personally benefit from the insights that literature gives us about the human condition. So, with such personal benefits, literature is more central than skills. Since literature can be instructive and inspirational to our personal learning, it makes sense to locate it in an intermediate position between personal unfolding and literacy skills in a 21st Century English Curriculum.

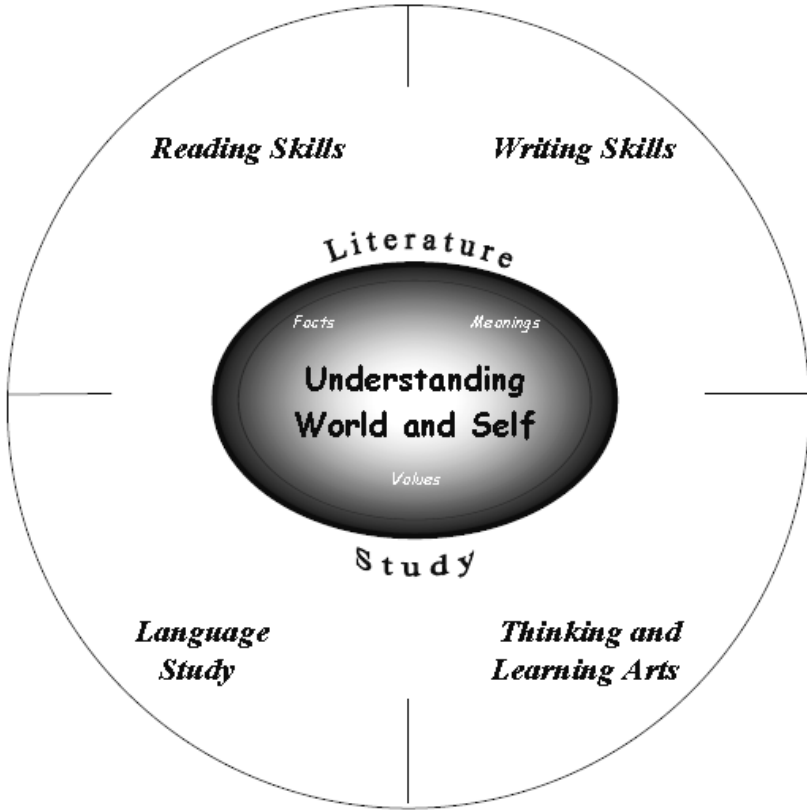


Figure 3: Cross Section of 21st Century English Curriculum

Are skills essential? Of course. They are essential because they help students pass tests, get good grades, get into college, find jobs, and play roles as productive citizens. Reading, writing, thinking and conversation skills are also important for deeper reasons—because they help students discover what they value, and therefore what topics might interest them, what books they might enjoy, what kind of career might be most satisfying, what kind of contribution they may wish to prepare themselves to make to their families, communities, nation, and world. Skills are important because of the focus and rigor they cultivate, focus and rigor we need to apply in sustained personal reflection as well as in analysis, helping today’s distracted and disengaged students discover purposes for continued learning and living. Beginning with a workable central aim of learning, and translating to a departmentally-crafted workable, central purpose of English (or math, science, art, social studies), and from there to teachers’ own course descriptions, we can help students equip themselves in accord with their developmental level, with viable reasons to learn.

Common Core and the Rigors of Deepened Learning

If the Common Core Standards (CCSS) are to engage students over the long term, we must complement the CCSS call for rigor in textual analysis with the deeper rigor of guiding our students systematically to discover who they are, what they stand for, and what future they want to create for themselves and their society. The CCSS documents not only leave room for such enrichment, I believe they encourage and even expect it: “While the Standards focus on what is most essential, they do not describe all that can or should be taught. *A great deal is left to the discretion of teachers and curriculum developer*” (CCSS Introduction, my emphasis). Students who most successfully master the rigors of the CCSS will be those who are also learning to navigate the deeper rigors of self-discovery.

As we undertake this balancing act, the theory and the practices of deepened learning such as the Personal Creed Project help us expand our understanding of rigor. A 16-year-old student, in a portfolio reflection he chose to write on the Creed Project, described his experience of a deeper rigor:

Never in my whole life have I ever experienced such understanding and insight [into] myself. Completing this project provided such a thorough analysis of me. Thinking back to all those days and nights finishing these Creed reflections really reminded me of the degree of difficulty it took to talk about certain things, and about the range of subjects I could talk about. I never realized how much there is to talk about in my life. Looking through my Creed Project again, I can still think of more material to add to these reflections. . . . I was able to, in a sense, see myself and learn what I really wanted in life. I can now picture my future and set my priorities straight for the following years to come. This project gave me determination and courage to follow through and succeed. Going through the Creed Project has definitely showed me a different side of English.

As important as it is for 21st century students to know who is making a given claim, it is just as necessary that soon-to-be global citizens are coming to understand those who are learning to *interpret* such a claim—themselves. This student, and all of our students, are depending on us to make this deeper dimension of English an honored part of a renovated curriculum.

Common Core State Standards are only the beginning of what should spell the end of the use of the term “reform” in education. “Reform” carries far too much baggage and has been wielded by far too many forces unequipped with understanding to guide what we ought to begin envisioning as the rebirth or renovation of education. As we enter this new period, perhaps we should consult those who have been exposed to a deeper experience of learning. Reflecting in her junior year in college, another former student looked back on her experience of the Personal Creed project five years earlier:

The Creed Project is a start at educating the student heart. I remember how the project changed the ambiance of the classroom. Sharing our Personal Creeds put us all on equal footing. We were all equally vulnerable and equally empathetic. There was a sense of cohesiveness in the classroom. By understanding one’s students on a deeper and personal level, a teacher can adapt their teaching style to truly serve each of their students effectively.

Fortunately for her own students, hopefully many years of them, this perceptive young woman is in her second year as a high school English teacher, the same point in her career at which I began developing the Personal Creed Project.

A Legacy of the Personal Creed Project

Is there a correlation between the experience of discovering that we *have* values, and the sense that we *are* valuable? The place where the sludgier elements of individuals can be refined into higher levels of consciousness is in the classrooms of an America that has learned to ask such questions at the core of classroom inquiry. In *The Universal Schoolhouse*, Moffett sounds a note of support for such a project: “The time has come to situate education in a perspective that comprises far more than management of schooling and that thus redirects thinking to intrinsic issues of human development” (xiii).

In these times of redefining national priorities, our classrooms should be laboratories of new understanding and discovery about the intersection between human development and education.

In *Harmonic Learning*, Moffett points to such an intersection: “Pursuing the question ‘Who am I?’ to whatever depth and height we can bear the answer is a cosmic voyage that should be the first goal statement in every school district’s curriculum guide, before that stuff about being good citizens and productive workers. Those will happen as fallout from self-development” (10).

As if to verify Moffett’s prediction, a recent email from another student of mine suggests where the Creed Project and other aspects of deepened learning may take the young people with whom I’ve been working. Two years before she came to my class, at age 13, this student was commended by the President as the youngest Obama-for-America organizer in the nation. Now, as a senior, she continues to be involved in political action. She wrote:

Although I was extensively involved in political activism and other leadership activities in my community before I did my Creed Project, it really helped solidify my understanding of my role in the world. I began to approach leadership with a new perspective -- not as something I merely enjoyed for the personal satisfaction I felt in making a difference in my community, or did as an activity that would assist me in the real world or college application process—but something that reflected who I was as a person, as well as my place in the world. From that point, everything I did became a product of my values, influences, and personal mission, and in retrospect, the Creed Project was the turning point in my life that allowed me to consciously realize that.

This student’s experiences drive home to me once again that sustained, systematic reflection, the core method of the Personal Creed Project, is one key to helping young people discover who they are and where they’re going in their lives.



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