

FIRST PLACE WINNER

CATE '13 Professional Writing Contest

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Mind the Gap: The Common Core as Social Justice

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

--Marcel Proust

At my charter—a Title 1 school—there is Giovanni whose mother is currently homeless. He is one of many. Homelessness is not only being without a home. It is also overcrowding. Giovanni’s cousin Michael lives with six cousins and his grandmother in a one-bedroom apartment. The spiel about Maslow’s Hierarchy is just that—basic needs? Slim chance. Poverty we won’t beat—not in time for our students.

In 2003, I left education and went to law school, certain that this was the course that would, ultimately, have the most influence. I would help write policy that would shutter the windows on the thought that geography is destiny. Kids born into high poverty areas tend to get a lackluster shot at things. Not always, but enough of the time to count. This is the growing divide that is captured in the pithy and disheartening phrase, “the achievement gap.”

Growing up in a single parent home with a teenage mother suggested that I would be part of a statistic—those loose end kids for which the system is more conveyor belt than dream machine. I was fortunate to encounter teachers that fostered my potential and pushed me to see the world with new eyes. My resultant perspective ensured that I knew a number of things, one of which was that I was poor and that the odds were stacked against me. This did not mean defeat. In fact, it meant that I would have to be resilient, a trait that would serve me well far beyond the constrictions of poverty.

The implementation of the Common Core standards is becoming increasingly controversial because it requires teachers to be trained to teach differently and approach education in a broader way. The six ELA shifts are basically a blueprint for creating critical thinkers. The questions lie in the implementation. How do we move these incredible standards from ideals to action?

There is a beauty in all of the mad dashes and uncertainties. I would argue that the Common Core is a lynchpin, a foundation from which to fight the implications of poverty. For example, I have long sought to turn my students into problem solvers capable of and interested in making improvements to the community. Implicit in this is a broadening perspective, a new set of eyes, for information gathering and disaggregation. Independent thinkers determine their own path and are trailblazers on it. They are not fettered by the status quo or even bought into it.

Arguably, the Common Core provides guidelines for developing student agency and leadership. If we consider again the ELA shifts, they are all preparing students to meaningfully participate in their own lives, to become actors rather than acted upon and to see that complexity is possibility.

As part of our college starts here elective program, I teach pre-law. The purpose of the pre-law course is to introduce students to a new way of approaching the world, one in which there is not necessarily a single right answer and evidence based arguments are the new normal. I am building arguers, those individuals that will not settle on tradition, but rather problem-solve, question and even unstitch it. The world has never improved in silence or because of it.

An unforeseeable consequence is higher participation rates in class discussions. Why? Simple. Nobody who can support his or her argument with compelling evidence is ever wrong. In my class, everyone is the guy in Man on a Wire and nobody ever falls.

For our first pre-law lesson we discuss Brown v. Board of Education, a seminal case that springboards the obvious sentiment that separate is not equal. I show the students photographs of both white and African American schools from the 1950s.

We start our discussion by comparing and contrasting the scenes. They cannot know what I know, that 60 years earlier so many of them would be packaged into overcrowded rooms with scant resources and faulty plumbing. They are in grades 3-6 and cannot yet fathom the concept of just over half of a century, even though it is alarmingly close.

“It’s not fair,” says Reno.

“Why not?”

“There are not enough desks for all of the kids,” she says, her outrage palpable.

Reno will convert what she sees into a searing and touching treatise on the inequity of *separate, but equal*. She has new eyes.

The Common Core insists on this level of dialogue. It makes explicit all of the things that great teachers have been doing for a long, long time. In that way, the Common Core is not new, not revolutionary and not particularly profound, but consider the promise of the Common Core, what it can do for our socioeconomically disadvantaged students. It carves out a critical perspective inside of all of the analyses. It builds kids that know to ask why and how to interpret answers.

Our lesson on Brown ends with thoughts on how to achieve equality in education. I show the students pictures of schools in Beverly Hills with elaborate media rooms and computer tablets. Maybe the Brown case has not yet reached its final act.

“We have to succeed,” Noemi says.

“Why?”

“Otherwise history doesn’t change.”

I read research all of the time—the kind that predicts student achievement by zip code. I know that it is a complicated mosaic of parent education, resources and basic human needs.

Nonetheless, I challenge the very obvious thought that you can’t worry about the future if you’re worried about being hungry today. This is a luxury our students do not have—poverty is nearly insurmountable and we won’t eradicate it soon enough for them. They must know and overcome its implications. In essence, they must have new eyes.

For our next pre law class, we look at the McDonald’s hot coffee case. I show a clip from the documentary *Hot Coffee*. I like the Common Core’s expanded definition of “text.” In this case, we are looking at informational material, which is another Common Core push.

The goal for today is to see that there are at least two sides to every story. We go through the facts of the case and then divide into two teams and argue for our respective client, McDonald’s, the famous fast food institution, or Liebeck, the woman scorched by the coffee.

Intense debate is followed by the inevitable question:

“Who is right?” asks Inez.

“I don’t know,” I say.

A mild uncomfortable rumble washes over the room.

“Who presented the best evidence?” I ask.

The Common Core promises something I have long advocated for—ambiguity. Days of right versus wrong or one pathway to the “right” solution are done. There is now something to be said for Ruth Benedict’s near proverb: *“The trouble with life isn’t that there is no answer, but that there are so many answers.”*

Over 80 percent of my students qualify for free or reduced lunch. By the end of the semester, they come to me with a number of petitions to improve the school. I show them to the Assistant Principal who approves campus beautification projects and a vending machine with healthy snacks.

At the same time, they begin to get involved in service learning projects. For example, a handful of students launch a campaign to generate funds for a struggling animal shelter. They create informational brochures, prepare PowerPoint lessons and organize a poster contest. The process is sophisticated, inspiring and contagious.

The Common Core, in this context, is not a set of standards or even a manner of assessment, but rather an imperative piece of a social order that is beginning to be moved forward not by students that recall facts, but by those that are taught to question and, when necessary, to overcome them.

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