Meeting the Common Core State Standards

by Dr. Michael W. Smith

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are designed to "ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school." (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) A recent analysis (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, Yang, 2011) of the standards establishes that the CCSS will "shift content . . . toward higher levels of cognitive demand" (p. 106). But the CCSS are about more than rigor. They also pose new challenges for what and how we teach. Let's explore how ***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*** meets those challenges.

> Analyses of more than two decades of research (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Baumann & Kame'enui, 2004; Graves, 2006; Nation, 1990; National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgesen et al., 2007) indicate that to be most effective in promoting students' vocabulary growth, instruction must include four key components.

Challenge 1: An Increase Emphasis on Informational Texts

The CCSS push for an increased emphasis on informational texts absolutely clear:

> Part of the motivation behind the interdisciplinary approach to literacy promulgated by the Standards is extensive research establishing the need for college and career ready students to be proficient in reading complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas. (p. 4).

Indeed, the Standards call for 70 percent of the reading that secondary students do to be informational, although they stress that "teachers of senior English classes, for example, are not required to devote 70 percent of reading to informational texts. Rather, 70 percent of student reading across the grade [i.e. across all of their subjects] should be informational" (p. 5). Despite this caveat, there's sufficient concern about this changing emphasis that *Washington Post* columnist Jay Matthews published an article entitled "Fiction vs. Nonfiction Smackdown".

Rather than seeing fiction and nonfiction as being in competition, ***Inside*** sees them as complementary. All of our units are built around Guiding Questions. These questions are so interestingly complex that they have been taken up by a variety of disciplines. If we want our students to think about them, they have to read literature, to be sure, but they also have to read a wide range of informational texts as well. Reading fiction and nonfiction together in service of thinking about those questions invigorates both. And perhaps more importantly, it makes it clear to kids that what they read matters in the here and now (cf., Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

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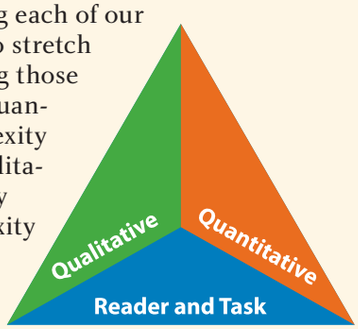
Challenge 2: An Increased Emphasis on Text Complexity

The CCSS "emphasize increasing the complexity of texts students read as a key element in improving reading comprehension." In fact, Cunningham (in press) argues that "the most widely discussed reading instructional change called for by the CCSS is a significant increase in text complexity." Indeed, he continues, "those who have not read the standards and only listened to the chatter about them may well have concluded that this is the only major change in reading instruction the CCSS entails."

Text complexity is itself a complex matter. As the Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy indicates assessing text complexity involves the consideration of three dimensions—qualitative, quantitative, and reading and task.

Given that our program is designed for striving readers and that one of their primary features is ability-appropriate texts, the CCSS's emphasis on the reading of complex text provided a significant challenge. We met that challenge by including instructional-level texts at accessible reading levels and by closing each of our units with a text designed to stretch students' ability. In selecting those texts we drew on both the quantitative dimension of complexity (Lexile ratings) and the qualitative dimension of complexity (our analyses of the complexity of the text's structure, language, knowledge demands, and levels of meaning).



Although the CCSS require all students to read complex texts, they explicitly state they do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations. Therefore, once we selected the texts, we had to draw on our understanding of reader and task considerations to help students grapple with those texts. The very structure of our books is designed to help students do the stretching we ask them to do. In the first place, we provide instruction designed to help them have meaningful transactions with the texts we ask them to read. (More on that in the next section.) In addition, because our units are built around Guiding Questions, they involve extended reading, writing, and discussion about texts that address a similar issue. As a consequence, all of the reading, writing, and talking that students do acts as a kind of frontloading (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube-Hackett, 2001) for Close Readings, the "stretch" texts that close each unit. Moreover, because our units are built around questions that address issues that are important in kids' lives, students can draw on their prior knowledge and experiences outside school as a source of implication. This background knowledge will help students understand the content of the texts, freeing up mental resources to cope with more sophisticated syntax. Moreover, the feelings of competence that our instruction and unit organization develop coupled with the meaningful social work we ask students to do will increase their motivation (cf. Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). And as the Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy explains, "Students who have a great deal of interest or motivation in the content are … likely to handle more complex texts" (p. 6).

Challenge 3: A Focus on Close Reading of Particular Texts

Without question, the CCSS emphasize developing deep understanding of particular texts. Here are the first three anchor reading standards:

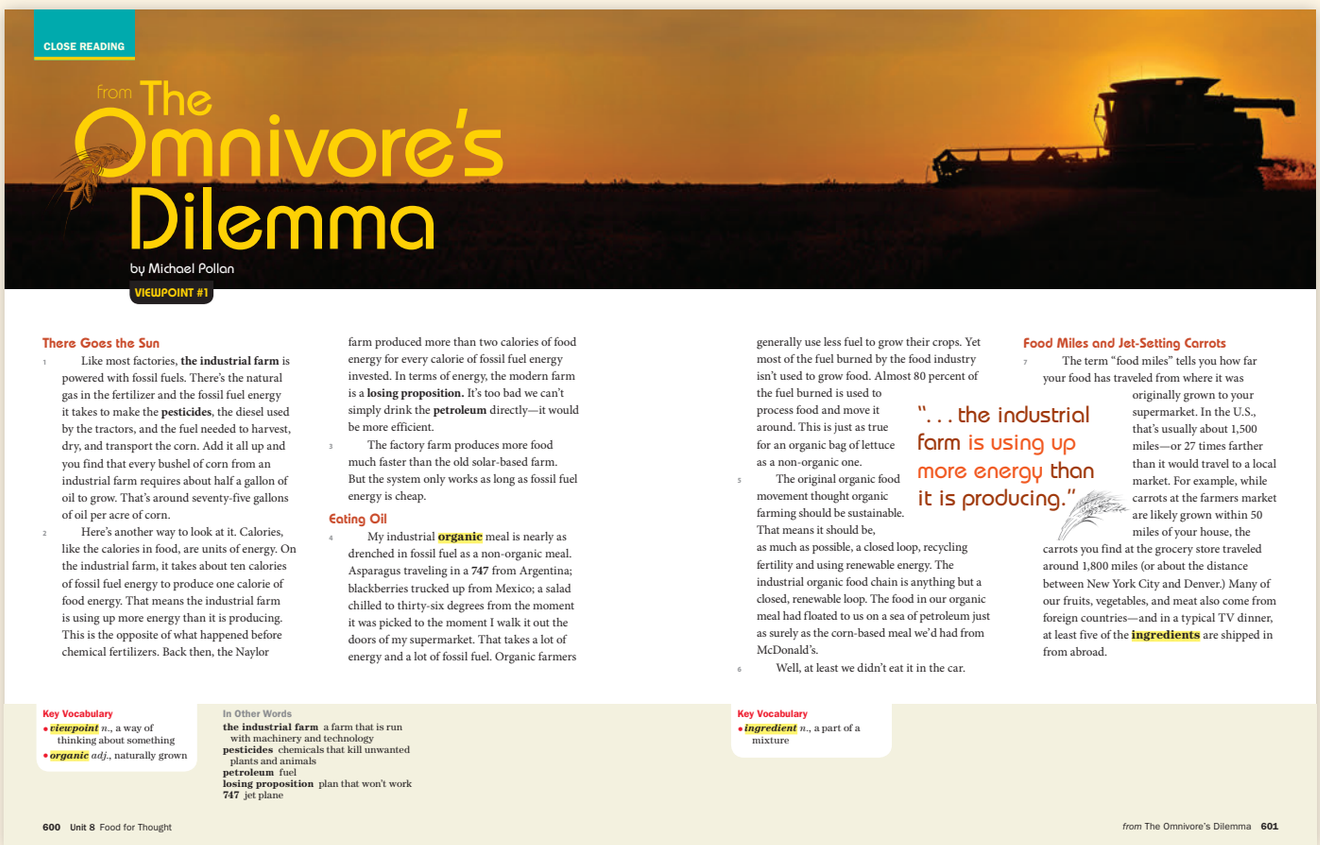
1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

However, although these standards focus on learning from individual texts they do so in a way very much in line with the strategy instruction we provide. We focus on making inferences (Standard 1). We focus on determining importance (Standard 2). We focus on synthesizing (Standard 3).

In fact, in a guide for publishers seeking to develop materials consistent with the CCSS, two of the lead authors of the standards (Coleman and Pimentel, 2012) suggest that strategy instruction can support the learning from text goal the CCSS articulate:



CLOSE READING

from The Omnivore's Dilemma

by Michael Pollan

VIEWPOINT #1

There Goes the Sun

1 Like most factories, **the industrial farm** is powered with fossil fuels. There's the natural gas in the fertilizer and the fossil fuel energy it takes to make the **pesticides**, the diesel used by the tractors, and the fuel needed to harvest, dry, and transport the corn. Add it all up and you find that every bushel of corn from an industrial farm requires about half a gallon of oil to grow. That's around seventy-five gallons of oil per acre of corn.

2 Here's another way to look at it. Calories, like the calories in food, are units of energy. On the industrial farm, it takes about ten calories of fossil fuel energy to produce one calorie of food energy. That means the industrial farm is using up more energy than it is producing. This is the opposite of what happened before chemical fertilizers. Back then, the Naylor farm produced more than two calories of food energy for every calorie of fossil fuel energy invested. In terms of energy, the modern farm is a **losing proposition.** It's too bad we can't simply drink the **petroleum** directly—it would be more efficient.

3 The factory farm produces more food much faster than the old solar-based farm. But the system only works as long as fossil fuel energy is cheap.

Eating Oil

4 My industrial **organic** meal is nearly as drenched in fossil fuel as a non-organic meal. Asparagus traveling in a **747** from Argentina; blackberries trucked up from Mexico; a salad chilled to thirty-six degrees from the moment it was picked to the moment I walk it out the doors of my supermarket. That takes a lot of energy and a lot of fossil fuel. Organic farmers generally use less fuel to grow their crops. Yet most of the fuel burned by the food industry isn't used to grow food. Almost 80 percent of the fuel burned is used to process food and move it around. This is just as true for an organic bag of lettuce as a non-organic one.

"… the industrial farm is using up more energy than it is producing."

5 The original organic food movement thought organic farming should be sustainable. That means it should be, as much as possible, a closed loop, recycling fertility and using renewable energy. The industrial organic food chain is anything but a closed, renewable loop. The food in our organic meal had floated to us on a sea of petroleum just as surely as the corn-based meal we'd had from McDonald's.

6 Well, at least we didn't eat it in the car.

Food Miles and Jet-Setting Carrots

7 The term "food miles" tells you how far your food has traveled from where it was originally grown to your supermarket. In the U.S., that's usually about 1,500 miles—or 27 times farther than it would travel to a local market. For example, while carrots at the farmers market are likely grown within 50 miles of your house, the carrots you find at the grocery store traveled around 1,800 miles (or about the distance between New York City and Denver.) Many of our fruits, vegetables, and meat also come from foreign countries—and in a typical TV dinner, at least five of the **ingredients** are shipped in from abroad.

Key Vocabulary
- ***viewpoint*** *n.*, a way of thinking about something
- ***organic*** *adj.*, naturally grown

In Other Words
the industrial farm a farm that is run with machinery and technology
pesticides chemicals that kill unwanted plants and animals
petroleum fuel
losing proposition plan that won't work
747 jet plane

Key Vocabulary
- ***ingredient*** *n.*, a part of a mixture

600 Unit 8 Food for Thought

from The Omnivore's Dilemma 601

Close Reading passages provide opportunities for reading and rereading short, more complex texts.

> Close reading and gathering knowledge from specific texts should be at the heart of classroom activities … Reading strategies should work in the service of reading comprehension (rather than an end unto themselves) and assist students in building knowledge and insight from specific texts. (p. 9)

That's just what ***Inside*** does. It teaches students strategies so that they can independently apply them to understand the specific reading we ask them to do. We avoid the "cookie-cutter" strategy-based questions that Coleman and Pimental critique. The Look Into the Text feature is a salient example of embedding strategy instruction in rich, textual context.

In short, we connect text-dependent questions and strategic instruction. As a consequence, we support students' "gathering evidence, knowledge, and insight from [the specific text] they read" even as we are teaching strategies that they can apply in new textual contexts.

In his comprehensive review of research on transfer Haskell (2000) points out that "Despite the importance of transfer of learning, research findings over the past nine decades clearly show that as individuals, and as educational institutions, we have failed to achieve transfer of learning on any significant level (p. xiii)." Despite this finding, Perkins and Salomon (1988) argue that teachers are too sanguine about the likelihood of transfer, relying on what Perkins and Salomon call the Little Bo Peep view of transfer; that is, if we "leave them alone" they come to a new task and naturally transfer relevant knowledge and skills. But that transfer doesn't happen. Perkins and Solomon note that "a great deal of the knowledge students acquire is 'inert'" (p. 23), meaning that students don't apply it in new problem-solving situations. As a consequence, Perkins and Salomon (1988) argue that teachers must work hard and quite consciously to cultivate transfer. They explain cultivating a "mindful abstraction" of a strategy allows it to be moved from "one context to another" (p. 25). That's why we provide explicit strategy instruction and provide multiple opportunities for students to apply their understanding.

We want students to grapple with the texts that they read so they can learn from them and use them to think about the Guiding Questions that organize our units. Strategy instruction coupled with repeated opportunities to apply those strategies in meaningful ways in a range of textual contexts is the way to do just that.

Challenge 4: An Increased Emphasis on Argumentation

The prominence of argumentation in the CCSS is undeniable: "[T]he Standards put particular emphasis on students' ability to write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues, as this ability is critical to college and career readiness." We respond to that increased emphasis in two ways.

The first is by working to create a culture of argumentation in the classroom through the use of essential questions, questions that have no definite answers. Structuring units around such questions signals to students that they'll need to make the kind of sound arguments that the CCSS are calling if their ideas about the essential questions are to carry the day.

This emphasis on argumentation stands in stark contrast to the patterns of discourse that prevail in schools. Indeed Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran's (2003) analysis of twenty 7-12 grade classrooms reveals that what they call open-discussion, defined as "more than 30 seconds of free exchange of ideas among students or between at least three participants" which "usually begins in response to an open-ended question about which students can legitimately disagree" (p. 707) averaged 1.7 minutes per 60 minutes of class time. This is a pretty depressing finding, but one that we work to overcome by the very structure of our program.

The second response to argument is to provide explicit instruction on how to read and write arguments. We teach students how to understand and employ Toulmin's (1958) model of argumentation, a model of argumentation that allows students to draw on their ability to make effective oral arguments in their efforts to craft effective written ones (cf., Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredrickson). Just as providing explicit strategy instruction with plenty of opportunities for applying that instruction in specific textual situations fosters transfer of learning in reading, so too does providing explicit instruction in the elements of argumentation along with plenty of opportunities to practice applying those elements foster transfer of learning in writing.

We want the struggling readers that our books are designed to serve to be college and career ready by the time they graduate from high school. That's why we have embraced the challenges that the Common Core State Standards pose.

Frequent opportunities for academic discussion are fostered through Guiding Questions.