

Common Core in the Classroom

New standards help teachers create effective lesson plans

by LUCY BOYD

WHEN I TELL PEOPLE that I spent my summer creating a curriculum aligned with the Common Core State Standards, I invariably get a quizzical look. In the often heated national debate over the Common Core, opponents have cast the standards as a threat to teacher autonomy and students' intellectual creativity. The result is a public perception that there is very little wiggle room for teachers in choosing what to present in their classrooms. My experience as a lead lesson planner reveals that perception to be a false one.

During my summer planning, I kept the Common Core standards next to me while I dove deeply into the novels and nonfiction works we would be reading in 7th-grade English the next year. The texts themselves were chosen by the leadership of my charter school network, Uncommon Schools, with guidance from both the Common Core text-selection criteria and the network's own curricular team. The lesson plan sequence, questioning, activities, close reading passages, schema, and focuses were up to me and my co-teacher.

To teach works ranging from Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* about the dictatorship of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic to Shakespeare's infamous tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, we created literature units with supplemental nonfiction readings, as the Common Core standards suggest. We chose key vocabulary words from each work and included discussions of broader concepts such as imperialism and internal oppression. We created lengthy writing assignments that asked students to compare and contrast nonfiction and fiction texts about the same topic, such as Julius Lester's *To Be a Slave* and Walter Dean Myers's *The Glory Field*. For the end of the year, we wrote an extensive sonnet unit, as the Common Core suggests for 7th-grade students, in which students analyze the impact a sonnet's form has on its meaning.

The Common Core standards served as a helpful resource. The New York State Department of Education online resource EngageNY lays out the standards by subject and grade level and offers additional resources for educators and families. Along with the standards, my co-teacher and I looked at essay questions from the English literature Advanced Placement tests to see where students would need to be in four or five short years.



Once our lesson plans were finalized, all the grade-level teachers were asked to compose, using key vocabulary and concepts from each unit, "ideal student responses" to serve as measures of student comprehension based on participation in class discussions. Such tools ensure that students are not only being taught according to the Common Core standards, but that they are learning according to them, too.

When the curriculum was completed, I felt confident about the lessons we had created, but knew this meant nothing if they did not resonate with the students. When preparing to teach 7th graders about dramatic irony and iambic pentameter, a teacher will naturally wonder, *will this be too hard for them?* A teacher's worst nightmare is to look out across a room to see the blank faces of students who are completely perplexed.

Happily, I found the answer to be no; it's not too hard. For our final class session devoted to *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck, students were asked to evaluate Steinbeck's characterization of Juana as weak. They first wrote their responses. Then "Daphne," a student who often struggled in English class, raised her hand. Daphne explained how Steinbeck depicts Juana as physically weak because she doesn't stand up to Kino's violence, but mentally strong because she refuses to "submit" to the power of the pearl. She went on to explain that Steinbeck's portrayal of Juana implies that she is stronger than Kino since the power of the pearl is what leads to his "destruction." The sheer fact that Daphne described Steinbeck's purpose with such precise vocabulary is, for me, proof that our students are more than ready for the challenge.

Moments like these by no means prove that the Common Core standards are perfect, nor do they account for other influences on students' learning. But as a teacher, I have found the Common Core standards to be an instrumental guide for constructing lessons that will challenge and engage my students.

Lucy Boyd taught for three years at North Star Academy Vailsburg Middle School, an Uncommon School, and is now pursuing her master's degree in public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School.