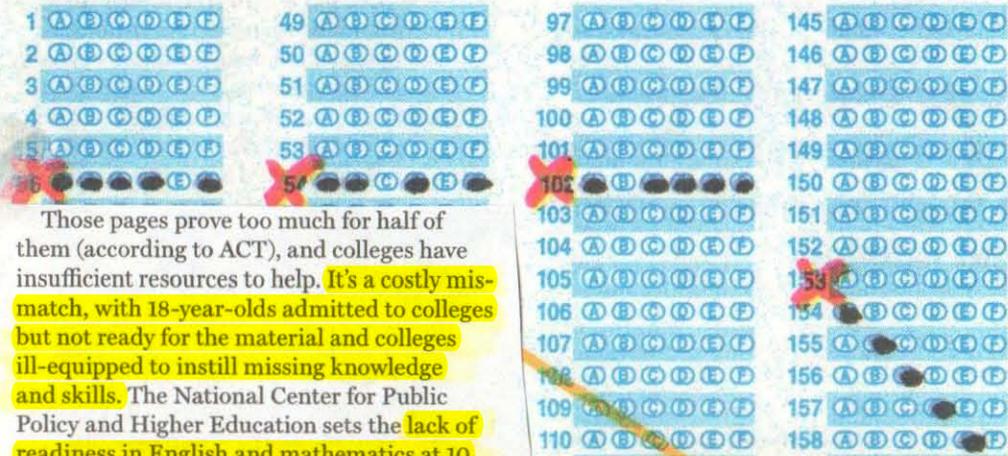


Why We All Have a Stake in the Common Core Standards

HOW MANY of my students can identify the Code of Hammurabi? Probably none of them, but first-graders in the state of New York should be able to do so. It is part of "Domain 4: Early World Civilizations," along with the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, cuneiform, the Great Sphinx, and dozens of other terms and facts in the English language-arts curriculum aligned to the **Common Core State Standards**, a set of national benchmarks establishing what students in elementary and secondary school should know at each grade level.

That challenge is one reason why the standards have led prominent educators like Diane Ravitch and Joanne Yatvin to denounce them as developmentally inappropriate, requiring too much knowledge in early grades.

To understand the rationale for the Common Core requirements, however, we must shift to what happens after high-school graduation. **When ACT, one of the best-known judges of college readiness, examined why so many first-year students end up in remedial courses and perform poorly, it identified one factor above all others: "Performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are likely to be ready for college and those who are not."** Students three months out of high school enroll in freshman composition, a survey of U.S. history, and Econ 101 eager and hopeful, only to find that they can't comprehend a Supreme Court opinion, 100-year-old oration, contemporary poem, and other texts.



Those pages prove too much for half of them (according to ACT), and colleges have insufficient resources to help. **It's a costly mismatch, with 18-year-olds admitted to colleges but not ready for the material and colleges ill-equipped to instill missing knowledge and skills.** The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education sets the **lack of readiness in English and mathematics at 10 percent for selective schools, 30 percent at less selective colleges, and 60 percent at two-year institutions**—a perennial drain that colleges can't remedy by themselves.

Hence, the Common Core standards, which call for higher "text complexity" in readings and "rich content knowledge within and across grades." Yet, as is noted in one of the Common Core appendices, high-school texts have, if anything, actually decreased in complexity in recent decades, a divergence prompting another reform that has evoked outcries: more informational text. **The standards require that 70 percent of high-school reading assignments be informational, not fiction, poetry, or drama.**

Objections have been vigorous, but attempts to construe the mandate as anti-literary overlook its college-readiness purpose. To boost achievement in the freshman year,

ACT maintains, students must raise their complex-text proficiency, and one factor in proficiency calls for more informational-text assignments from early grades onward. **If a student has been exposed to the situations to which first-year readings refer, comprehension becomes much easier.** This common-sense premise is, in fact, one of the most important findings in the cognitive science of reading.

In one well-known study from 1988, junior-high students of differing reading abilities read a passage about baseball written at a fifth-grade level. When researchers compared subjects on their knowledge of baseball, those who knew a lot scored higher than those who knew little, even in cases in which low performers otherwise had better reading skills.

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In a more recent study, researchers administered a test containing two passages, one on familiar diseases, one on unfamiliar diseases, then tracked people's eye movements as they read. On the first, eyes moved swiftly and linearly; on the second, they slowed down, paused, and backtracked. **These and many other studies demonstrate that reading comprehension isn't an abstract skill transferable to any text. It depends upon the content. Every reading exam is also a knowledge test, a measure of familiarity with the subject matter of the passages.**

The relevance to college readiness is obvious. To comprehend the texts they will face in college, students need general knowledge about science, math, history, civics, geography, arts and literature, religion, and

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technology. E.D. Hirsch termed it “cultural literacy” in his 1987 best seller of the same name, and he derived his famous list of facts, personages, events, and ideas from the knowledge assumed in periodicals of influence like *The New York Times*. Critics cast Hirsch as a reactionary and a Eurocentrist, but his curriculum had a progressive aim—to provide disadvantaged students with the background knowledge that advantaged students received at home and in better schools.

As the cognitive scientist Dan Willingham says, knowledge “actually makes learning easier. Knowledge is not only cumulative, it grows exponentially. Those with a

rich base of factual knowledge find it easier to learn more—the rich get richer.” With background knowledge a key to academic performance, cultural literacy isn’t elitist. It’s an equalizer.

Hirsch’s ideas persuaded Common Core to aim at “building knowledge systematically,” and the varieties of knowledge necessary to

college readiness prompted the emphasis on informational texts. Most complex texts that college students encounter are not literary, and the secondary-school curriculum should reflect that proportion. Literature is secure because literary tradition is a crucial part of cultural literacy, a status the Common Core standards recognize with the command, “Demonstrate knowledge of 18th-, 19th- and early-20th-century foundational works of American literature.” (Regrettably, the Common Core doesn’t have a similar standard for British literature.)

Willy Loman, satire, and the poetry of King James stand proudly beside Gettysburg, separation of powers, and photosynthesis in the procession of cardinal things. The only adjustment English teachers need make is to add more literary nonfiction, which may include letters by Emily Dickinson, essays by Richard Rodriguez, chapters from *Up From Slavery*, and other unsurprising titles. Common Core readily admits them if they impart verbal facility and background knowledge that serve students well at the next level.

Critics of Common Core rightly worry, however, that curricula currently in development interpret “informational text” too nonliterarily and disregard cultural literacy. A troubling example comes from the National Council of Teachers of English, in a self-proclaimed guide to the standards. It declares, “the CCSS focus is on skills, strategies, and habits that will enable students to adapt to the rhetorical demands of their future learning and contributions.”

The authors mention “prior knowledge

that gives context to the complexities of further reading,” but the “context texts” they recommend include film excerpts, blogs, radio shows, podcasts, and graphic novels, options often nonliterary and minimally fruitful for cultural literacy. Indeed, the choice of materials is secondary: “How the texts are used to scaffold the reading experience takes precedence over which texts are chosen.”

The burden, then, lies with college teachers to ensure that “which texts” *does* take precedence, specifically, that new informational texts in high school pay off in freshman year. They must be compellingly literary and rich in historical, social, psychological, or moral content. “Do not spend precious hours on media and topics that will not build familiarity that will be rewarded at the next level,” we must insist. Select informational texts that augment the knowledge base and enhance literary understanding.

College unreadiness doesn’t strike until students reach college and those of us who teach first-year courses scale down the readings because students don’t have the cultural literacy to understand them without delicate and plodding guidance. To arrest the slide, we should become watchdogs of how the Common Core standards are put in place, and we should protest and criticize when we discover high-school instruction that fails to anticipate the instruction we shall deliver months and years later.

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