Common Core and the Why Questions

As she spoke to attendees at a Common Core gathering, Lily Ekelsen, vice president of the National Education Association (NEA), painted a picture of her civil rights instruction. She described a deep, authentic learning model experienced by her elementary students as they dug into civil rights, desegregation, equal rights, and America. Then came the test. The assessment asked who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. None of her students answered that question correctly even though it was probably more important to know why Martin Luther King received the Nobel Peace Prize, rather than who received the prize. Despite her students' scores on the multiple-choice assessment, they understood civil rights. That is why she and the NEA were thrilled with the Common Core State Standards (www.corestandards.org). They foster higher-level thinking.

FROM KALAMAZOO TO KANSAS

Despite many wonderful aspects, the Common Core Standards remain unfamiliar to most educators. Many stressed-out educators view the new standards as another mandate that might fade. I beg to differ. Across America, the states have adopted these new learning standards, and we are all going to be on the same page. When a family moves from Kalamazoo to Kansas, they will not have to worry that their children will be out of sync with instruction in the new state and waste a year to align their knowledge. The Common Core raises the bar for states struggling to decide what should be taught or tested. As low-performing schools strive to improve instruction, the blueprint has been defined. The Common Core defines the curriculum in enough detail and specifies ways to teach that content creatively and innovatively, to produce graduates who are problem solvers and globally competitive.

As America strived to do well on assessments, authentic learning went the way of the dinosaur. Assessment became the curriculum. Educational administrators and communities feared the annual newspaper issue that reported assessment and ranked schools in their areas. The pressure was on to score well, which often surpassed the need to teach well.

WHAT'S IN THE COMMON CORE FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIANS?

As the Common Core curriculum is adopted and unpacked, librarians should celebrate that finally, from the beginning, directions for inquiry and inquiry-based learning are embedded throughout. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills states that America needs graduates
who can think creatively, solve problems, are information and technologically literate, and are able to collaborate. That is the language of inquiry. We have been waiting for this moment.

REPACKAGING RESEARCH
In our area we encourage teachers to “repackage research” for the Common Core. When we use the phrase “repackage,” teachers are more apt to consider collaborating when they realize they do not have to recreate, but can merely redesign. Often an old research unit can be redesigned by:

• Initiating the project with a critical, compelling question for students to answer rather than a “deadly packet” asking students to dig for information
• Allowing students to create the questions for research collaboratively
• Embedding technology as a working platform
• Changing the final knowledge product into a 21st century communication product

EXPLAINING INQUIRY IN THE COMMON CORE FRAMEWORK
As the date approaches when the new learning standards take effect, we find teachers slowly trying to digest these new standards. This is our chance to shape teachers’ understandings and bring them into our information haven. To recognize inquiry in the Common Core, you must have an understanding of the process.

HERE IS A SIMPLIFIED EXPLANATION:
Inquiry starts with a question. This question will inspire students to create questions and research to find answers. Evaluation and synthesis of this information is imperative to foster long-term retention and deep learning. Students draw conclusions from information and create a knowledge product to share with others.

Inquiry is not a clean fill-in-the-blank search for predetermined facts a teacher has predefined. Inquiry transfers responsibility into the hands of the students. Inquiry fosters student ownership of the process and student pride in the product. It works! In a well-defined unit, the teacher serves as a learning concierge and academic guide, ensuring that learning goals are met, content vocabulary is understood, and assessment is authentic.

THE ANCHOR STANDARDS
If you examine the Common Core Standards, you will see that College and Career Readiness standards are highlighted as the anchor standards. Inquiry language is embedded in all of the anchor standards. Even in subjects such as math and science you will find this language (see images). The Common Core Standards can be a labyrinth of material to digest. Start with the following link: www.corestandards.org/

RESEARCH TO BUILD AND PRESENT KNOWLEDGE
7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility

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and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research


LITERACY AND RIGOR
For years librarians have supported and enhanced literacy instruction, but now alarm bells are ringing. With Race to the Top (RTTT), the old-fashioned meaning of literacy is stressed. Embracing literacy is a Common Core objective, presenting literacy not just in English class. We should encourage teachers to include various forms of literacy within their lessons. In an inquiry-based model, the student often searches for the reading material. Print, electronic, media, and other electronic formats are recognized in the Common Core.

The Common Core Standards acknowledge that students arrive at college unprepared to read and comprehend difficult text. Our goal as educators is to graduate college and career ready seniors, and we are failing this task. The Common Core English language arts anchor standards state that students should "read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently." The keyword is rigor, and rigor is not Google.

Offer your services to teachers as they search for appropriate material to meet Common Core requirements of literacy rigor. Encourage students to move from Google to databases that are challenging, credible, and more efficient.

That is vastly different from the online habits we observe, such as "super-squirreling" and "website kangarooing." We must model how to slow down, read, comprehend, and analyze for credibility and accuracy on an electronic platform. We need to teach students to be skeptical of all information heard and read on the Internet so that they innately take the time to evaluate the source appropriately. Common Core Standards ask us to focus on complex textual writing in order to graduate college and career ready students.

Navigate the pages on the Common Core State Standards Initiative website. I found some of the best language for librarians by following these clicks:

Corestandards.org > The Standards > English Language Arts Standards > Anchor Standards > College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (or Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language)

PROMOTING THE COMMON CORE
As you find a page with "library lingo," print it. Highlight the research language. Highlight the references with statements such as "comparing primary and secondary sources." Highlight statements such as, "Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others." Share these findings at team meetings; share them with your building principal and at faculty meetings. Suggest developing professional learning activities that focus on inquiry-based learning. Offer to help teachers create units aligned with the Common Core Standards. Hold lunchtime picnics in your library and introduce teachers to inquiry.

If you are looking for a good inquiry document to help teachers understand this process, visit http://tinyurl.com/4zd2z0j. Additional inquiry resources can be found at http://wswhecobes.org/SSS.cfm?subpage=410. This material is copyrighted, so please ask permission to print more than one copy.

Paige Jaeger is the coordinator for school library services at the Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex (WSWHE) Board of Cooperative Educational Services, Saratoga Springs, New York.

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