

Washington Post, “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss
Posted November 7, 2013:

The biggest weakness of the Common Core Standards

By Marion Brady

A particular interest of mine has long been what kids are taught in the early years of adolescence. No surprise, then, that when the Common Core Standards went public, I clicked on the Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, (http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf) and scrolled down to pages 61 and 62, where you can find lists of standards for different grades.

Let’s look at the standards for 9th and 10th graders. There are two lists for the various subjects, but they are nearly identical. Reading them, I was struck by something I’ll boldface for the sake of emphasis:

- Standard 1: “Cite specific **textual** evidence...”
- Standard 2: “Determine the central ideas...of a **text**...”
- Standard 3: “Follow...a procedure...defined in the **text**.”
- Standard 4: “Determine the meaning...relevant to **texts**...”
- Standard 5: “Analyze the relationships...in a **text**.”
- Standard 6: “Analyze the author’s purpose in a **text**...”
- Standard 7: “Translate...words in a **text**...”
- Standard 8: “Access...evidence...in a **text**...”
- Standard 9: “Compare findings...presented in a **text**...”
- Standard 10: “...read and comprehend...**text**...”

To their credit, the standards require kids to “cite, compare, translate, determine, define, analyze”—in short—do something that traditional classroom instruction has always neglected. They require them to think for themselves, not just try to remember something read in a book or heard in a lecture.

But that benefit comes at great cost. It perpetuates and reinforces what’s always been a major—no, make that THE major weakness of modern schooling—its preoccupation with playing with letters and numbers to the neglect of all other ways of learning.

That view was underlined for me two or three months ago when I spent several hours in the Morgan Motor Company factory in Malvern, England, watching and talking to workers turning out built-to-order cars. They’d all served four-year apprenticeships on the factory floor. It was underlined for me again by an article published in the October 8, 2013, *Guardian* titled “Rewild the Child” (<http://www.monbiot.com/2013/10/07/rewild-the-child/>).

Common sense says we educate to help learners *make better sense of experience—themselves, others, the world*. Those Common Core Standards above say something very different, that we educate to help learners make more sense of text—words on a page. There’s no acknowledgement of the myriad other ways humans learn, no apparent recognition of the inadequacies of text in preparing the young for an unknown future, no apparent appreciation of

the superior power of firsthand knowledge compared to secondhand knowledge, no provision for adopting ways of learning yet to be discovered,

Yes, it's important for learners to know what others have to say, but facing a complex and unknown future, it's far more important that the young learn how to figure things out for *themselves*, more important that they know how to create *new* knowledge as it's needed, more important that they be able to imagine the as-yet-unimagined.

The promotional hype for the Common Core Standards rightly criticizes traditional schooling's failure to teach critical thinking and other higher-order thought processes. But those who think the Common Core Standards turn a 19th Century curriculum into a teaching tool equal to the challenges of the 21st Century haven't thought the matter through.

I find it hard to believe that before putting their stamps of approval on the Common Core Standards, someone in the U.S. Department of Education, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, or the many other organizations now singing the praises of the standards didn't call attention to their narrow, "bookish" slant.

Surely at least some people in those organizations know (or certainly *should* know) about "hands on" project learning, or place-based studies, or of the curriculum-changing potential of the concept of General Systems Theory. If they weren't aware of recent developments in curriculum design, they should at least have had second thoughts about the intellectual costs of squeezing the arts and play out of the school day. If millions of kids have to sit in their seats with their noses held to the Common Core text grindstone, "rigor" ought to mean a lot more than merely making sense of secondhand "informational text."

Hmmm. Just now, re-reading the 10 standards specifying the various mental processes kids are to bring to the reading of text, I see no mention of the thought process of hypothesizing. The ability to generate hypotheses is essential to creative, imaginative, divergent thought. Was its omission just carelessness? Or is it possible that policymakers aren't interested in that kind of thinking? There's a lot of talk right now about the importance of STEM education—science, technology, engineering, mathematics. But given the third-world-direction in which America's economy is headed, a great many kids will probably end up not in STEM occupations but in low-paying service jobs.

##