**The Common Core Prioritizes Skills, Trusts Teachers to Select Content**

By Delia DeCourcy, secondary literacy consultant, Oakland Schools

This is a response to Robert Shepherd’s claims about the ELA Common Core State Standards in [a post on Diane Ravitch’s blog on July 5](http://dianeravitch.net/2013/07/05/robert-shepherd-common-core-requires-teaching-abstract-skills-not-content/). Shepherd is a curriculum designer and textbook developer who contends that *“The Common Core will be the final nail in the coffin of coherent curriculum development in the English language arts.”* Though I’ll set aside whether Shepherd is conflating “coherent curriculum development” with textbook development, I can’t let his key argument go without response.

He claims that the ELA CCSS are problematic because “*Content must drive instruction. The CCSS have this exactly backward.”* But I would argue that Shepherd’s stance is backward. Students acquire knowledge while simultaneously developing core reading and writing skills. While Mr. Shepherd and I are both curriculum designers, I have never written a textbook. What strikes me about his approach to curriculum design is that textbooks are content-driven. But that doesn’t mean excellent English language arts classrooms should be entirely content-driven. They must balance skill and content, and the Common Core supports such a balance.

The essential problem with Shepherd’s argument is that humanities-based standards that dictate content, in turn, dictate curriculum. Standards that are skill based allow districts and schools to determine content—what literature focus is best at each grade-level for that district or school’s students. As a former teacher and curriculum writer of units aligned to the Common Core for the state of Michigan, I believe this skill-based approach to standards is both effective for and empowering of teachers.

If the Common Core Standards *did* dictate content, then educators, parents, and politicians would be (further) up in arms about them. Dictating content at a national level seems dangerous. Who would decide which texts from which countries are the most important to read and which get left behind given time limitations? (Note: the literary movements Shepherd mentioned in his post were all western.) Do we really want all our students reading about the same things and in all the same books? How would that approach cultivate diversity of thought? Instead, the Common Core provides an appropriately spiraled set of ELA skills that students master as they encounter teacher-chosen content. If we dictate the content taught in ELA classrooms, we further de-professionalize the teachers who are already under attack.

While he does not state it outright, I believe part of Shepherd’s objection to the ELA standards is that they reflect a shift away from ELA teachers being teachers of literature and towards them being teachers of literacy. And I believe this shift is appropriate and necessary. As a former faculty member at the University of Michigan’s Writing Center, I was often surprised by undergraduates’ inability to deeply engage with a text or write a cohesive argument. This shift toward literacy doesn’t mean ELA teachers will no longer teach literature; however, it does mean that the pedagogical approach to that teaching will focus more heavily on developing students’ writing and reading skills. The CCSS also demand that teachers support students in writing in multiple modes and text types—something they must be able to do the moment they arrive at college. English teachers have always shouldered the burden of teaching reading and writing skills in conjunction with teaching literature. The CCSS makes that work explicit and prioritizes text complexity, research, and increasing students’ intellectual independence, while also laying out literacy expectations for the other content areas. The English teachers I know are cheering about all these shifts.

And finally, Shepherd repeatedly refers to the Common Core as just a set of “abstract skills.” I’m perplexed by this phrase. Critical thinking, a key focus of the Common Core, is certainly abstract, as is teaching students how to revise a draft or develop a research question (both skills required of the Core). But this is the challenge of teaching—to scaffold abstract ideas and processes so that students can engage with them. Does Shepherd not trust that our teachers are capable of this work? I certainly haven’t seen any writing textbooks that do an outstanding job of teaching critical thinking skills because that kind of teaching requires interaction in the form of feedback, discussion, and modeling—a job best left to teachers.

In closing, I’d like to note that while I’m a strong proponent of the Common Core, I’m not a supporter of high-stakes testing. My work in developing curriculum aligned to the Common Core has made me especially skeptical that standardized tests will be able to fully and accurately assess the kind of thinking that the standards require. Unless the high-stakes paradigm shifts, the promise of the Common Core will not be met.