

Common Core: The Challenge and the Opportunity

By Kate Blossveren, Meredith Liben and Stephen DeWitt

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provide a unique opportunity for education in the United States. They allow for a common language to emerge around quality, expectations and instruction. They offer a platform for cross-state sharing of instructional resources (look at OER Commons and the Teaching Channel videos for evidence of that).¹ They also help to ensure that all students are held to the same expectations, regardless of their zip code. While the standards focus squarely on mathematics and English language arts/literacy, they still provide clear opportunities for career and technical education (CTE) teachers to support students' preparation for life after high school.

And this, perhaps, is what makes the CCSS so important. These standards anchor our K–12 system in the core, foun-

dational academic knowledge and skills that all students need to be prepared for successful entry into college *and* careers. The CCSS were developed with *success after high school* as the key anchor point, facilitating standards that offer a clear progression of knowledge and skills from the earliest grades all the way to high school graduation. The standards were designed to reflect the current demands of college faculty and employers,^{2,3,4} focusing on communication skills, problem solving, reasoning and critical thinking—all through the lens of academic content.

In fact, an analysis of the CCSS and the Essential Skills Statements from the National Career Clusters® Framework found that these most commonly demanded skills were strongly reflected within the CCSS by design.⁵ While the standards do not address everything students need in order to be successful—including mainly

career-specific technical skills—they do provide a foundation on which to build such skills.

Fundamental to the CCSS is that literacy is no longer expected to be the responsibility of English teachers, but it must be a shared responsibility across an entire school. This speaks to the relatively low literacy levels of U.S. students and adults,⁶ as well as the increasingly complex texts required in today's economy and global society. Yet, few educators, and in particular CTE instructors who are more likely to enter the classroom from alternative routes and from industry, have opportunities to learn how to teach literacy, a unique skill unto itself.

CTE and Literacy: The Common Core Institute

To support state CTE leaders' and educators' understanding of the challenge of



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embedding literacy strategies into CTE classrooms, the Association for Career and Technical Education, the College Board, Student Achievement Partners and the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc) co-hosted a two-day workshop in April—CTE and Literacy: The Common Core Institute—on implementing the Common Core State Standards into CTE. The content and strategies to improve student literacy are applicable to CTE teachers in all states, even if they are implementing individual state standards.

With representatives from more than a dozen states present, participants had an opportunity to do a deep dive into the CCSS; build their understanding of practical structures and practices to enable all CTE students to read and write the material they need to succeed; and identify knowledge, strategies and next steps to bring back to

CORE Community to Support CTE Practitioners

ACTE is pleased to announce the development of CORE Community, a national online teacher practice network that will focus on supporting CTE professionals to implement Common Core State Standards (CCSS) strategies aligned with their unique roles and abilities. The project is part of a robust, multi-network effort to help teachers across the country better connect to share instructional best practices and strategies to implement the Common Core. It also advances one of ACTE's Preferred Future objectives to "focus on integration across the education continuum to meet employer needs and student aspirations."

Even if the CCSS have not been adopted by your state, the CORE Community can support you! It is a CTE-specific approach designed specifically for CTE educators and intended to help students be able to better apply and augment the math and literacy concepts they are learning in their academic courses.

Six states (Georgia, Illinois, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma and Utah) have been selected to participate in the CORE Community pilot, which is rolling out soon. However, any CTE educator is eligible to participate in the pilot (limited to the first 500 participants), and the CORE Community will be open to all CTE educators once the pilot is completed.

The University of Central Missouri (UCM) is a primary partner working with ACTE to provide the content to fuel the online program. UCM has a history of CCSS support in Missouri, and has worked with ACTE to share that support to a wider national audience. Other key partners include the Association for Career and Technical Education Research, NASDCTEc and the National Center for Literacy Education.

Information about the project, including how CTE teachers can participate in the CORE Community, will be published on www.acteonline.org/corecommunity as it becomes available.

The Common Core State Standards' Instructional Shifts in Mathematics

In addition to the instructional shifts related to English language arts/literacy, there are also key instructional shifts in the mathematics standards, notably:

1. A sharper *focus* on fewer key topics in each grade to allow educators to go deeper into the content, to help students better understand concepts rather than the “mile-wide, inch-deep” approach to learning suggested in previous mathematics standards.
2. A *coherent* progression of skills and concepts across grades, as well as coherence among major topics within grades.
3. *Rigor* through mathematical practices that fosters reasoning, as well as flexible *application* of concepts and skills to solve real-world problems and deeper conceptual understanding across the discipline.

their states, districts and schools.

This article provides a high-level overview of many of the strategies and topics discussed over the two-day workshop.

Key Strategies for Addressing the Instructional Shifts

Any discussion of the standards must begin with a look at their critical *instructional shifts*. These shifts are central to the design—and implementation—of the Common Core State Standards, and they were

informed by evidence gathered by international benchmarking of high-performing countries' standards, as well as the demands of today's economy and employers.

The CCSS in English language arts/literacy focus on speaking, listening, reading, writing and research skills by promoting:

1. Regular practice with increasingly *complex text* and its academic language, or words that may appear in a variety of contexts.
2. Writing and speaking using *evidence drawn from texts* to present careful analyses, well-defended claims and clear information.
3. Building knowledge through *content-rich non-fiction* across the full curriculum, supported by literacy standards for science, history and technical subjects to enable students to read and write in a wider range of contexts. (See sidebar at left for instructional shifts in mathematics.)

Key Strategy: Selecting Texts Worth Reading

This may sound obvious, but students should be reading texts that are meaningful, relevant and appropriate. As such, it is vital for CTE instructors to use reading assignments to help build their students' knowledge of and in their specific field. Every technical area has relevant information that is transmitted through the written word—in newspaper and magazine articles, technical manuals and even novels or biographies—and this should be the reservoir of reading for CTE.

This is not to say CTE instructors are obligated to become second English teachers, but rather that they have a role to play in supporting the literacy skills that are part of their students' technical training and career preparation. And part of this role is in defining and selecting “texts worth reading,” as the instructor is the most qualified to know the types of readings that are vital in the related career field.

The benefit of finding these texts worth reading—those that are meaningful, relevant and appropriate—is that both instructor and student will be motivated to work to understand that reading since it is essential knowledge being transmitted.

Key Strategy: Asking Text-dependent and Text-specific Questions

In order for students to develop proficiency at anything, they need opportunities to practice. This is true of reading, writing and speaking about technical content, as well as gaining hands-on expertise in a shop or lab. The best way to promote this practice with reading is to ask students questions that will require them to go into the text to answer the questions instead of drawing from the experiences they already have. There really is no other way to do this than for instructors to carefully read the material they want their students to read and then prepare questions or activities that will send the students back to the text to answer them accurately. Students should be asked to organize and produce the evidence they gathered from the reading.

Here is how these two strategies could play out in one example: Early in the school year, students might be put in pairs and asked to “adopt” a piece of power equipment for the year. They would study the manual for that equipment, as selected by them or the instructor, and educate themselves *and their classmates* on the proper use, maintenance and safety features of that equipment.

Once instructors start thinking in terms of asking text-dependent questions, drawn from texts worth reading, other opportunities to build regular and meaningful literacy experiences into the technical work will start to pop out everywhere.

Key Strategy: Scaffolding Complex Texts

As is true of their high school peers, many students who enroll in CTE programs may not be ready to read the challenging material that exists in almost all technical subjects, nor are instructors trained to help them.

But common sense can take instructors and instructional coaches a long way. The best metaphor for this work comes straight from the Architecture & Construction Career Cluster: Scaffolds need to be built for students so they can safely navigate the tricky terrain of complex readings.

Here are some ways to do that scaffolding:

- Selections need to be “chunked” (shortened into meaningful but manageable portions).
- Students need to be able to talk about those sections, and educators need to ask about those sections as they teach.
- Text-dependent questions can help by pointing students toward the important ideas in the reading or helping them sort out a complicated procedural section.
- Students need to be taught explicitly how to pay attention to charts and technical drawings, and then how to connect those visual supports to the paragraphs that will deepen their understanding.
- Essential vocabulary needs to be taught explicitly.
- Students need to learn to pay attention to textual cues like captions and bolded words.

All of this direct instruction will help scaffold the experience so that it is safe and approachable for students who may not yet be skilled at making sense of what they read. They are also useful strategies for encouraging students to read advanced texts to prepare them for their next steps.

Defining Fluency

A key element of teaching students to be literate is ensuring students are able to be fluent readers:

1. Reading *accurately* what is on the page, including the punctuation.
2. Reading at an *appropriate rate* for the task and type of text.
3. Reading with appropriate *expression*.

Research conducted prior to the release and implementation of the CCSS found that as much as 60 percent of ninth graders are not fluent readers of eighth-grade material.^{7,8} Under the Common Core, what was once at the eighth-grade level in

many states has been identified as actually being appropriate for sixth graders, which will likely lead to an even greater number of students who are reading below grade level.

Here are a few key strategies and facts to know about fluency to help build it in your students:

- Fluency improves dramatically with multiple readings.
- Fluency improves when students hear a skilled reader read text they are looking at, i.e., reading along.
- Listening comprehension can precede reading comprehension.
- There is overwhelming research-based evidence that instruction incorporating multiple reading *and* occasional reading aloud (with students following) help make more complex text accessible to all students and build fluency.

Putting the Pieces Together

There is no question that teaching literacy is critical to students’ lifelong success—and

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that it is also a real challenge for educators, particularly those without appropriate training or professional development in this area. Yet, there are concrete strategies CTE educators can start implementing right now that build on existing lessons, assignments and projects, and will help strengthen students' ability to interact with and learn from texts. By starting to more intentionally integrate these literacy strategies today, CTE educators can make sure we have students who can communicate successfully in tomorrow's workplace. **Tech**

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ENDNOTES

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EXPLORE MORE

While the CTE and Literacy: The Common Core Institute was just one joint effort of the four partner organizations mentioned in the article, the following provide a number of resources that support the implementation of the Common Core State Standards across CTE.

ACTE is developing the CORE Community to support CTE educators with implementation of the CCSS (See Gates Grant sidebar). More information can be found at www.acteonline.org/corecommunity.

NASDCTEc maintains a page on its website for CCSS-related resources (www.careertech.org/ccss), which most notably includes "Career Technical Education and Common Core State Standards Resources," a compilation of relevant instructional and policy resources (last updated in April 2014) and a set of CCSS-aligned CTE classroom tasks.

Student Achievement Partners manages *AchieveTheCore* (<http://achievethecore.org/>) which offers a wealth of tools, resources and background on the CCSS. Although the site is not directly geared toward CTE students, there are many tools that will help support CTE students and teachers as they work with the CCSS for literacy in technical areas.

Wondering How the Common Core Will Affect Your Classroom?



Grow with us!



ACTE and its partners are launching the CORE Community, an online professional development portal to help CTE educators nationwide connect, share instructional best practices and integrate the Common Core State Standards into CTE.

Learn more at
www.acteonline.org/corecommunity

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