

History and Social Studies: At the Core of the Common Core

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Last summer, the Maryland State Department of Education held “Educator Effectiveness Academies” for all public elementary and secondary schools across the state. The purpose of these academies was to provide professional development for teachers about the new Common Core Standards for Mathematics and English/Language Arts. Invited to participate in these meetings were the principal, along with representatives from English/Language Arts, Mathematics, and STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics). Notably absent and not invited to participate were history and social studies teachers. This is not unusual given the traditional place of these disciplines at the bottom rung of the academic priority list; however, anyone who carefully reads the Common Core Standards in English/Language Arts will realize that the exclusion of these teachers was based upon a mistaken presumption.

History and social studies are indeed an integral component of the Common Core – which posits an interdisciplinary approach to literacy. Note this statement from the Common Core Standards when addressing the common myth that only English teachers are responsible for teaching literacy. “However, because college and career readiness overwhelming focuses on complex texts outside of literature, these standards also ensure students are being prepared to read, write, and research across the curriculum, including in history and science. These goals can be achieved by ensuring that teachers in other disciplines are also focusing on reading and writing to build knowledge within their subject areas,” (CCSC, 2011). This concept of *disciplinary literacy* -- defined as advanced literacy instruction embedded within content area classes such as history and social studies (Moje, 2008; Shanahan and Shanahan, 2008) – is the driving force behind the Common Core Standards for English/Language Arts. Indeed, an entire section of the standards is devoted to Literacy in History/Social Studies, (CCSC, 2011).

Since the early 1990's, there has been a surge in research around history education. Much of this research has focused on how students best understand history, and has led to a movement to change how we teach history (more on that later). At about the same time that this research was making its way into academia, the federal government introduced a large grant program to fund improvements in history education – The Teaching American History Grant program. As a requirement of these grants, local school systems had to form partnerships with universities, museums, historical societies, etc. These partnerships helped to bring together the recent research on history education with curriculum developers and pedagogy experts in the school systems. Combined with an infusion of money heretofore unseen in history education, this formed a nexus that has led to a paradigm shift in how history is taught in many American classrooms.

This research on history education has focused on how students typically engage in historical text as they attempt to develop interpretations of the events of the past in the manner that professional historians might (Bain, 2000; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 1991). This involves engaging students in the careful analysis and interpretation of complex text such as primary and secondary source documents, maps, images, and other forms of data. A little over ten years ago, the idea of a teacher using a primary source in the classroom was considered a novelty. Now, it is an accepted element of the educational lexicon in social studies instruction. Textbooks and other educational resource materials now regularly include primary sources as an integral part of the product choices. In addition, these TAH grants have spawned professional learning communities of teachers who have developed high quality instructional materials to share through an educational clearinghouse of sorts. With names like “historical investigations,” “history labs,” “historical detectives,” or “history as a mystery,” these materials have become ubiquitous resources in American history classrooms around the nation.

The Common Core Standards for English/Language Arts call for an increased emphasis on *informational text*. Most of this informational text – sometimes referred to as expository text -- comes from disciplines outside of English. The curriculum in most secondary English/Language Arts programs has traditionally been driven by

the use of literature or *literary text*, and a focus on narrative writing. In contrast, informative and argument writing form a larger proportion of the writing standards in the Common Core. In their “Key Points in Language Arts,” the standards indicate that, “The ability to write logical arguments based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and relevant evidence is a cornerstone of the writing standards, with opinion writing—a basic form of argument—extending down into the earliest grades,” (CCSC, 2011). This is exactly the kind of writing that is the key to success on *Advanced Placement* exams in history, (College Board, 2011). The Document Based Questions (DBQ) requires students to engage in the close reading of text and the corroboration of multiple sources in order to develop an evidence-based argument. Further, the standards indicate that research is considered another keystone of the writing process, with the written analysis and the presentation of research findings the end product of research projects. The National History Day program is an excellent example of the kind of research and argumentative writing that inform much of the standards.

If the school districts that adopt the Common Core Standards in English Language Arts properly interpret its essential premises, history and social studies stands to benefit greatly from a renewed emphasis on the critical thinking skills inherent in these disciplines. Long ignored or marginalized by the focus on tests of basic reading skills without context as fostered by No Child Left Behind, history and social studies should be seen by local school systems as the one of the primary subjects needed to meet the challenges of the Common Core and its forthcoming assessments. Here’s hoping that the Maryland State Department of Education sees fit to include these teachers in next summer’s Educator Effectiveness Academies.

References

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