

Literature or Technical Manuals:  
Who Should Be Teaching What, Where, and Why?

Sandra Stotsky  
Professor Emerita of Education Reform, University of Arkansas

Paper presented at the Educational Policy Conference  
The Constitutional Coalition  
St. Louis, Missouri  
January 25, 2013

**I. Purpose**

Over 45 states adopted Common Core's ELA standards in 2010, in some cases before they were even written. Only in 2012 did some discussion about their implications take place in the media. Discussion has centered mostly on what English teachers are doing to their classroom curriculum to address Common Core's division of reading standards into 10 for informational texts and 9 for literary texts. Some teachers and parents believe students should spend more time in English classes learning how to read informational texts, chiefly because that is the kind of reading they will do in college and daily life. Others deplore what they see as a drastic reduction in literary study, the traditional focus of high school English as well as the major focus of English teachers' academic coursework as English majors.

Recently, some attention shifted to an appendix in Common Core's ELA document that lists titles sorted by grade level and genre (stories, poetry, drama, and informational text). Concerns have been expressed about what lies behind some of these titles, especially the titles of government reports.

The purpose of Appendix B was to suggest the level of complexity that reading and English teachers are to seek in the texts they select to teach at a particular grade level. It was not intended as a list of recommended, never mind required, titles for classroom study, simply as "exemplars" of "complexity and quality" by grade level and genre. Appendix B was also not intended only for reading and English teachers. Some of the critics of Common Core's 50/50 division of its reading standards for the English class have forgotten that the full title of this document is "The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects." But they are not alone in their neglect to examine the implications of this title. No reporters, state board members, parents, and other commentators on Common Core's

standards have paid more than cursory attention to what the architects of Common Core's ELA standards suggest are "exemplars" of the informational texts high school teachers of **other** subjects are supposed to use in order to increase instruction in informational reading in their classes.

The lack of attention to this facet of Appendix B is unfortunate. It's time to ask some questions about the kinds of informational texts the architects of Common Core think high school history, math, and science teachers should teach and then to consider what these teachers can actually teach, given their training, the academic level of their students, and the relevance of texts like these to their courses. When we do ask some questions, we can see more clearly the damage these federal reading standards are doing to the entire high school curriculum.

## **II. What is New to English Teachers in Common Core?**

First, let us review what Common Core requires of English teachers that is new to them. The new and controversial requirement is the division of reading instruction at every grade level into about 50% informational reading and 50% literary reading. It seems quite logical to see this arbitrary division of reading standards leading simultaneously to a reduction in the study of imaginative literary works in high school and an increase in the study of informational or nonfiction texts. This division makes nonfiction a genre equal in value in the English class to drama, poetry, and fiction combined, a non-egalitarian approach that was not discussed in public beforehand with English teachers or literary scholars, or agreed to by them.

Despite the logic of this meaning for 10 standards on informational reading and 9 on literary reading for the construction of a classroom curriculum, the architects of Common Core's ELA standards strongly insist that imaginative literature remains the emphasis of high school English classes in their standards. They point out statements in the document to the effect that while 30% of what high school students read overall should be literary and the other 70% informational, the informational material should be taught (for the most part) in other subjects.

However, this 30% figure raises important questions that have not been discussed, never mind answered. Since students typically take 4-5 major subjects in high school and English is therefore responsible for only about 20-25% of what they read (assuming students read something in their science, math, history, and foreign language classes), wouldn't this mean that just about all of the reading instruction in high school English classes should be literary so that students can achieve

there most of the 30% quota desired by Common Core? Students would need about 5-10% more literary study somewhere else to satisfy Common Core's quota, although Common Core's architects don't explain where else literary study is to take place or what kind of literary study elsewhere would satisfy their quota, especially if students don't achieve most of the 30% literary quota in the English class.

There is some imaginative literature that students could read and discuss elsewhere in the curriculum, for example, in middle school science classes, how about *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, to explore the impulses behind the beginning of science fiction in Europe? Or, in the history class, *Hitler's Diaries* (a hoax), *Pedro's Journal* (the fictitious diary of Columbus's cabin boy), Rigoberta Menchu's falsified autobiography, or *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (a political forgery first published in Russia in 1903), to explore the differences in their purposes. But Common Core's architects would first need to clarify their intentions with that 30% figure. What do they really want in the English curriculum itself?

### **III. What Does Common Core Really Want in the English Curriculum?**

To complicate an already confusing picture, Common Core also says that English teachers will need to increase nonfiction reading instruction. It is therefore still not at all clear what Common Core really wants English teachers to do. How can Common Core expect students to engage in literary study (or do literary reading) for 30% of their reading instructional time when they are in a high school English class for only about 20% of the school day or year (typically one period per day or a two-period block per day for one semester)? How can English teachers at the same time increase the relatively small amount of nonfiction they already teach and have always taught? It is obvious that they can increase the amount only by teaching informational or nonfiction reading 50% of English class time. But how are they to do so when Common Core's architects insist that the high school English class should continue to focus on literary study, and they expressly want students reading literature for 30% (not 20%) of their school reading experience?

Adding to the total muddle in the Common Core document is what English teachers (e.g., in Arkansas, Georgia, New York, Massachusetts) have been told to do to implement Common Core's standards. State departments of education and local superintendents have told them to cut down on the number of full-length literary works they have typically taught, teach excerpts instead, and teach nonfiction for about 50% of their reading instructional time. In other words,

they want literary study reduced to what is logically suggested by Common Core's 50/50 division of its reading standards.

But this doesn't mean that literary study has been banished. In the last week of December 2012, prominent supporters of Common Core's standards produced a barrage of blogs and op-eds claiming that its architects have been consistently "misinterpreted." The email blast from the Foundation for Excellence in Education—an organization led by former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, a major Common Core backer—was typical. It denounced the "misinformation flying around" about what will happen to literature under Common Core. "Contrary to reports," it said, "classic literature will not be lost with the implementation of the new standards." A glance at the standards' own suggested text lists, it noted, "reveals that the common core recognizes the importance of balancing great literature and historical nonfiction pieces."

In this flurry of blogs and op-eds, Common Core's advocates simply set up a straw man. No critic had claimed that NO literature would be taught under Common Core. They have said only that fewer works than usual will be taught. What is more important, however, is the question that wasn't answered at all. Common Core's advocates have not attempted to explain why almost all publishers, English teachers, school administrators, and policy makers at departments of education have "misinterpreted" Common Core's document. Why do teachers and administrators continue to think that the 50/50 division of reading standards at every single grade level means that about 50% of what English teachers teach in the classroom must be informational or literary nonfiction? Not one superintendent nationally has been reported as retracting the 50/50 directive and telling English teachers to emphasize literary study as usual.

In one sense, it is not surprising that no one is overtly retreating in the face of these conflicting statements, district policies, and percentages. English teachers know they are going to be held accountable for their students' scores on common reading tests, no matter what their colleagues teach. Moreover, they do know how to read. Anyone who talks to English teachers knows that they are reshaping their classroom curriculum to fit the 50/50 mandate, even if few are willing to speak to reporters and identify themselves, like Jamie Highfill, an English teacher in Arkansas. Fortunately, even one teacher's voice tells us something. Her current experiences raise a huge hitherto unexplored question. What are students reading for their nonfiction quota in the English class and where are the titles coming from?

#### IV. Informational Text Exemplars in Common Core's Appendix B

One major addition to Highfill's grade 8 curriculum this past year, on the advice of a well-paid Common Core consultant to her school, was Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*. Where did this title come from? Common Core's Appendix B, it seems. (It is important to recall (1) that Common Core's English Language Arts document—66 pages long altogether—ends with a 9-page section on “literacy” standards for history, science, and technical subjects, and that (2) Appendix B groups “exemplar” informational titles according to whether they are for an English class, a history class, or a science, mathematics, or technical class.) However, *The Tipping Point* is listed as an informational text in Appendix B for grades 11/12 and for science, mathematics, or technical classes, **not for grade 8 or for English**. Moreover, Highfill had to toss out a 9-week poetry unit to make room for Gladwell's book and a few related informational pieces, even though as an English teacher she is not an expert on epidemics, one of the three major topics in Gladwell's book.

Let's look more closely at this new can of worms. What else is in Appendix B for informational exemplars? For English teachers in grades 9/10, we find Patrick Henry's Speech to the Second Virginia Convention, Margaret Chase Smith's Remarks to the Senate in Support of a Declaration of Conscience, and George Washington's Farewell Address. In fact, most of the “informational” exemplars for English teachers in grades 9/10 are political speeches. Why political speeches, and why these political speeches, as exemplars for English teachers? How many English teachers are apt to understand the historical and political context of these speeches? How did such heavily historically-situated political speeches with few literary qualities come to be viewed as suitable nonfiction reading in an English class? No explanation is given.

As puzzling as these particular titles may be to an English teacher, what about Common Core's exemplars for history teachers in grades 9/10? We find, among a few appropriate exemplars (on the history of indigenous and African Americans), E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, 16<sup>th</sup> Edition, Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*, and Wendy Thompson's *The Illustrated Book of Great Composers*. It's hard to see even a well-read history teacher comfortably tackling excerpts from those books in the middle of a grade 9 or 10 world history or U.S. history course.

But whoever compiled and sorted out the “exemplar” titles for informational reading in science, mathematics, and other technical classes in grades 9/10 wins the prize for the most fertile

imagination and futile suggestions. What well-trained science teacher would toss out a unit on the Periodic Table or DNA in order to teach students in chemistry or biology classes how to read *Recommended Levels of Insulation*, a report released in 2010 by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency/U.S. Department of Energy? And what up-to-date science teacher would use Jacob Bronowski and Millicent Selsam's *Biography of an Atom*, published in 1965, for reading or science instruction in grade 9 or 10, regardless of the academic level of the chemistry or physics course?

The one selection presumably intended for math teachers is even more startling. What sane math teacher would ever use Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* to teach reading? *Elements of Geometry* is a classic textbook requiring students to develop proofs for increasingly complex propositions using an increasing number of axioms. It could still serve as the main textbook in a geometry course to help math teachers compensate for Common Core's mainly non-Euclidean geometry standards. But for "literacy" instruction?

When we look at the titles recommended for history and science teachers in grades 11/12, we finally realize that Common Core's goal of informational "literacy" for high school students is, in fact, a sad joke on high school teachers. Informational exemplars for English teachers include (along with writings by Emerson and Thoreau, who have always been taught in American literature survey courses) Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and the Bill of Rights. These titles can't develop "informational literacy" in an English class. They contribute to knowledge about the American Revolution and the Constitution when they are studied (as they should be) in their historical and political context in a U.S. government or history class.

Now let us see what informational exemplars history teachers are given in grades 11/12. Along with a suitable text for excerpting, de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, we find Julian Bell's *Mirror of the World: A New History of Art* and *FedViews*, issued in 2009 by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. These two titles clearly don't fit into a standard grade 11 American history course or a grade 12 U.S. government course. What course does Common Core think they fit into or, again, doesn't it matter?

By the time we finish perusing the sample informational titles for grade 11 or 12 teachers of science, math, and technical subjects, we can only conclude that the architects of Common Core's reading standards do not understand who high school teachers teach and what. At these grade

levels we find the following as exemplars of quality and complexity for classroom reading: Mark Fischetti's "Working Knowledge: Electronic Stability Control" (*Scientific American*, April 2007); *Executive Order 13423: Strengthening Federal Environmental, Energy, and Transportation Management*, issued in 2009 by the U.S. General Services Administration; Ray Kurzweil's "The Coming Merger of Mind and Machine" (*Scientific American Special Edition*, January 2008); W. Wayt Gibbs, "Untangling the Roots of Cancer" (*Scientific American Special Edition*, June 2008); and Atul Gawande's "The Cost Conundrum: Health Care Costs in McAllen, Texas" (*The New Yorker*, June 2009).

Take a deep breath and ask yourself: Would any normal high school science teacher delete a physics unit on gravity or a chemistry unit on the components of an atom in order to try to teach students how to read a government policy report on energy, transportation, and the environment, or articles like these from *Scientific American*? Would any high school science teacher insert articles like these into the middle of such units for "knowledge-building" or use articles like these for "literacy" instruction? Below-average readers can't easily read (or don't want to read) the science curriculum materials prepared especially for them. They certainly can't manage the staggering vocabulary supporting the level of abstract thought in these "exemplar" materials, even if educated adults find most of them inherently more interesting to read (which is why they are in a journal or magazine, not a textbook).

There seems to be some confusion in the minds of Common Core's architects about the subject matter English teachers are trained to teach. But the potpourri for high school history and science teachers indicates their profound misunderstanding of the purpose, content, and academic level of the entire high school curriculum.

#### **V. What Common Core's Exemplars for Informational Texts Tell Us**

I have just spent a lot of time highlighting some of the titles in Appendix B that are intended to serve as exemplars of the complexity and quality of texts high school teachers should be using to teach "literacy" in subjects other than English. I have done so because we need to explore why so many of these exemplars are out of place not just in the subject area Common Core placed them but in a high school curriculum altogether.

The idea behind Appendix B in Common Core's document affects all the subjects taught in a typical high school curriculum, not just the English class. This was intentional, the standards

writers indicate. They wanted to make teachers across the curriculum as responsible for teaching “literacy” as the English teacher, which at first sounds fair, almost noble. But to judge from the sample titles they offer to fill the demands they make for informational reading in other subjects (but in the English class especially), informational literacy seems to be something teachers are to cultivate and students to acquire independent of a coherent, sequential, and substantive curriculum in the topic of the informational text.

The informational texts listed for teachers of other subjects in Appendix B of Common Core’s English language arts document reflect, ultimately, the consequences of giving free reign to people to write standards documents who are, apparently, insufficiently aware of three very important matters: the content of the subjects typically taught in regular public high schools, the academic background of the teachers of these subjects, and the academic level of the courses in a typical secondary curriculum, grade by grade, from 6 to 12. What makes the situation so alarming is that the intellectually and pedagogically unsound mandates of the authors of Common Core’s ELA and “literacy” standards—the major ones being their emphasis on informational reading in the English class and their injection of context-free informational texts into the other subjects—have been inflicted on all teachers in over 45 states by governors and members of state boards of education, none of whom apparently knew enough about the secondary school curriculum and the development of children’s minds to ask any questions about the many poisonous tentacles of this document before imposing it.

I am in no way suggesting that the ELA standards writers deliberately sought to make a worse conceptual mess of the secondary English curriculum than it now is and to damage the other subjects to boot. They were acting from good intentions. I believe that they truly believe that adequate college-level reading and writing comes from informational reading in K-12 and that more informational reading instruction in K-12 will make more students ready for college. Their approach, however, is based on a misunderstanding of the causes of the educational problem they sought to remedy through Common Core’s standards—the number of high school graduates who need remedial coursework in reading and writing as college freshmen and the equally large number of students who fail to graduate from high school and go on to a post-secondary educational institution.

The architects of Common Core assume that the major cause of this educational problem is the failure of our public schools to teach low-performing students in K-12 adequately or sufficiently



how to read complex texts before they graduate from high school. That is, their English teachers have given them too heavy a diet of literary works and teachers in other subjects have deliberately or unwittingly not taught them how to read complex texts in these other subjects.

This assumption doesn't hold up. High school teachers will readily tell you that low-performing students have not been assigned complex textbooks or literary texts because, generally speaking, they can't read them and, in fact, don't read much of anything with academic content. As a result, they have not acquired the content knowledge and the vocabulary needed for reading complex textbooks in any subject. And this is despite (not because of) the steady decline in vocabulary difficulty in secondary school textbooks over the past half century, the huge increase of Young Adult Literature in the secondary curriculum, and the efforts of science and history teachers from the elementary grades on to make their subjects as text-free as possible. Educational publishers and teachers have made intensive and expensive efforts to develop curriculum materials that accommodate students who are not interested in reading much. "Graphic novels" (glorified comic books) are but one example in the English class today. These accommodations in K-8 have gotten low-performing students into high school, but they can't be made at the college level. College-level materials are written at an adult level, often by those who teach college courses.

We hear almost every day of policies that urge all students to get a post-secondary degree or set quotas for college degrees in a state. But there is no reason to expect students who read very little in or outside of class to become prepared for authentic credit-bearing courses in their first year of college just because their secondary teachers spend class time trying to cultivate a nebulous concept—informational literacy—that these students cannot easily acquire even with a coherent and graduated curriculum in the topics of informational texts. Only strong high school readers can acquire it to some extent independent of a coherent and graduated curriculum in the topics of, for example, the "exemplar" articles in *Scientific American*. Weak readers in subject area classes end up deprived of class time better spent immersed in the content of their courses.

Such a requirement does not address the unwillingness of many high school students to read or write much on their own. Experience-based narrative writing has been promoted in writing workshops as a way to develop writing because children will be eager to write about what they know best—theirself—and can more easily do so in narrative form. But this idea has led to a lot of poor though fluent writing because experience-based writing is not text-based and higher levels of writing are increasingly dependent on higher levels of reading. Students unwilling to

read a lot do not advance very far as writers, even with a full diet of autobiographical writing. The attempt to get reading into the writing process by asking students to relate something in what they read to their lives (text-based autobiographical writing) leads to the same limited source of ideas—personal experience (sometimes fabricated)—not a higher level of analytical thinking.

The major casualty of little reading is the general academic vocabulary needed for both academic reading and writing. The accumulation of a large and usable discipline-specific vocabulary (often called a technical vocabulary) depends on graduated reading in a coherent sequence of courses (known as a curriculum) in that discipline. The accumulation of a general academic vocabulary, however, depends on reading a lot of increasingly complex literary works.

It is well known that 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century writers used a far broader vocabulary than modern writers do, even when writing for young adolescents (e.g., *Treasure Island* or *The Black Arrow*). The literary texts that were once staples in the secondary literature curriculum were far more challenging than the contemporary texts (or the Young Adult Literature) frequently assigned. And because the “literate” vocabulary that writers like Robert Louis Stevenson used was embedded in stories with interesting plots, students would absorb this literate vocabulary as they read these stories. Interesting plots kept them reading, and lots of reading has always been the main way the meanings of words outside of daily life are learned.

The reduction in literary study will lead to fewer opportunities for students to acquire the general academic vocabulary needed for college work, especially if English teachers give them contemporary informational texts with a simplistic vocabulary to read in place of these older staples. They won't be able to give them serious discipline-based informational texts outside the context of their own discipline-based curriculum because students (as well as their English teachers) won't be able to handle them.

## **VI. Solutions**

What is one solution to the problem Common Core's architects sought to solve—how to help poor readers in high school? Schools can establish secondary reading classes separate from the English and other subject classes. English is a subject class, and literature is its content. Students who read little and cannot or won't read high school level textbooks can be given further reading instruction in the secondary grades by teachers with strong academic backgrounds (like Teach

For America volunteers) who have been trained to teach reading skills in the context of the academic subjects students are taking. It's not easy to do, but it is doable.

A better solution may be to expand the notion of choice to include what other countries do to address the needs of those young adolescents who prefer to work with their hands and do not prefer to read or write much. Alternative high school curricula starting in grade 9 have become increasingly popular and successful in Massachusetts. There are waiting lists for most of the regional vocational technical high schools in the state. Over half of their graduates go on to a post-secondary educational institution. The occupations or trades they learn in grades 9-12 motivate them sufficiently so they now pass the tests in the basic high school subjects that all students are required to take for a high school diploma.

Help is needed for high school English teachers who are under the gun to provide 50% informational reading instructional time because their superintendents "misinterpreted" the intentions of Common Core's architects. The Gates Foundation should provide professional development funds for secondary English teachers to develop curriculum modules of about two-three weeks in length that supplement the classic literary works they choose with essays or informational excerpts from the same literary period and tradition. The Gates Foundation should also train consultants to provide good examples to English teachers that do so. For example, the Common Core consultant to the English teachers in the Fayetteville, Arkansas schools might have recommended contemporary essays on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe instead of Malcolm Gladwell's book to a teacher like Jamie Highfill who had selected *Animal Farm* to teach her grade 8 students. Her 9-week poetry unit was gone, but essays by other mid-20<sup>th</sup> century English writers on life in a totalitarian society would help her students to better understand Orwell's book. Gladwell's book has no intrinsic connection to any grade 8 English teacher's classroom curriculum.

I am left with a question I began with. Why were intelligent and educated people (reporters, state board members, governors) so eager to accept the opinions of standards writers who had no understanding of the K-12 curriculum in ELA and mathematics and of organizations that they knew were being paid by the Gates Foundation to convince them of the "rigor" and "benefits" of this mess? Why didn't they read Appendix B for themselves, especially in the high school grades, and ask how subject teachers could possibly give "literacy" instruction in the middle of content instruction? Most might not have had the time to ponder the implications of the titles for

informational texts across the curriculum. But not one of them? Self-government cannot survive without citizens who are willing to ask informed questions in public of educational policy makers and demand answers.

Intelligent people of all political persuasions need to demand a complete revision of these damaging national standards. They should also demand the selection of academic experts and well-trained teachers to do so. We might then have before us an English language arts and mathematics curriculum that promotes, not retards, intellectual development in all our students.