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Closing the Door on Standardized Test Preparation and Opening the Door to Next Generation Literacy

Posted by [johnnyincision](#)

Vicky Giouroukakis, Ph.D., and Maureen Connolly, Ed.D.

Introduction

“I want to facilitate learning that helps students be the best versions of themselves.”

“I teach to inspire a new generation of book lovers!”

“I teach to change lives!”

“I teach to show students how BRILLIANT they can be!”

These are the words of four graduate students who are excited about becoming English teachers as of September 2016. Notice anything about their reasons for teaching? No one mentions wanting to increase students' test scores. We believe

that you would be hard-pressed to find a teacher candidate or practicing teacher who chose this profession because of a passion for test preparation, but as teachers and students are facing mandated standardized assessments like PARCC, Smarter Balanced, the new SAT and ACT, as well as local measures to determine student growth, we are growing concerned that the level of importance placed on these assessments will lead to teaching to the test in order to ensure student promotion and teacher retention. According to Neill, “humans learn best through active thinking. ‘Learning’ while not thinking is like remembering lists of phone numbers one will never call. Memorization of facts and procedures has its place, but deep learning must engage the brain and spur thinking. Teaching to the test rarely accomplishes either” (43). This phone number analogy brings to light the importance of authentic learning experiences rather than test prep; however, many teachers may believe that they can only teach effectively if they close the classroom door to surreptitiously engage students in authentic learning experiences that don’t look like standardized test prep. We believe that the door needs to stay open, and teachers and students alike need to make the case that learning is about more than a test score.

This seems like an obvious statement. We know plenty of teachers, parents, and students who would agree. Guess who else agrees? The College Board. In 2014, The College Board issued the following statement:

We firmly believe that rates of college and career readiness and postsecondary success will not improve if teachers and students are distracted by the need to speed through impossibly broad course content and spend time on narrowly cast test preparation in an understandable but misguided effort to boost scores at the expense of mastery of critical knowledge, skills, and understandings. Further, we believe that the rates of college and career readiness and postsecondary success will improve only if our nation’s teachers are empowered to help the full range of students practice the kinds of rigorous, engaging daily work through which academic excellence can genuinely and reliably be attained. (14)

In this article, we share ways to close the door to test preparation and open the door to authentic learning that will help students succeed not only on standardized exams, but also in life beyond school. How do we determine student success when it comes to Next Generation Literacy? As English teachers, we look to the Capacities of the Literate Individual.

Opening the Door to Developing Next Generation Literacy

Think of the daily literacy practices of one adolescent who is typical of many of his peers. We will call him Ben. Ben wakes up in the morning and checks his cellphone for texts and emails; he responds and maybe uses social media to post something online. He scans Flipboard for the latest news. He gets ready and puts on

his headphones to listen to music as he rides the bus to school. In school, Ben travels from one subject class to the next and learns content through reading, writing, and speaking as well as research and study in various ways. Both in class and at home, Ben works on varying assignments that require him to use his knowledge and experiences to understand and acquire new information as well as express his opinions verbally or in writing while using supporting evidence and logical reasoning. Technology is used to varying degrees as a means of learning and communicating content. What technology he selects to use and how he uses it in order to demonstrate his knowledge depends on the task, audience, purpose, and subject-area.

For example, in his ELA class, Ben discusses the issue of euthanasia in the context of the novel, *Of Mice and Men*. He is assigned to research the pros and cons of this issue, complete a discussion guide presenting both sides, take a position and defend it both verbally and in writing. He uses the internet for research and the Peardeck application to visually represent his arguments. A debate assignment allows Ben to express his opinions with supporting evidence and exchange ideas which will further his understanding of the issue. As a final activity, Ben is asked to write an argument essay in which he supports or disputes the act of euthanasia that George inflicts on Lennie in the novel by presenting his arguments in a logical and coherent way using sound evidence from both research and the text. Ben works collaboratively with other students in his class, some with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and exchanges diverse viewpoints. Think of the daily literacy practices of one adolescent who is typical of many of his peers.

We can see from this scenario that Ben is developing certain Next Generation Literacy skills that we want all students to demonstrate. These skills correspond with the Capacities of the Literate Individual (CLI) that have been outlined by the Common Core:

1. **Literate individuals demonstrate independence with text.** They can, independently, with little guidance from teachers and peers, comprehend various complex texts and apply literacy knowledge and skills.
2. **Literate individuals build strong content knowledge.** They acquire and share knowledge of subject matter through reading, writing, and speaking as well as research and study.
3. **Literate individuals respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline.** They set and adjust their communication in relation to audience, task, purpose, and discipline.
4. **Literate students comprehend as well as critique.** They understand what authors are saying through their texts but also know how to analyze and examine these texts critically.
5. **Literate individuals value evidence.** They can cite and communicate evidence and logical reasoning to support their interpretation of text.

6. **Literate individuals use technology and digital media strategically and capably.** They employ technology thoughtfully and effectively and can determine which media are best suited for their communication goals.
7. **Literate individuals come to understand other perspectives and cultures.** They encounter perspectives and ways of life that are different from their own and are able to work and communicate effectively with peers of diverse backgrounds.

(Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010)

We believe that when students, administration, and parents can see a clear correlation between authentic learning experiences and the Capacities of the Literate Individual, they will be able to understand how student learning relates to assessment. More importantly, if students are engaged in authentic experiences, they will understand how their learning relates to their self-betterment and to the betterment of their local, national, and/or global community.

How do we make this connection? By utilizing Backward Design.

Using BD to Open the Door

Backward Design (BD) can be used as a framework to open the door to teachers' creative thinking and guide them to successfully teach skills necessary for achieving lifelong literacy. When it comes to planning, many teachers think primarily about what they will do and say (the input part of the lesson) and less on the skills and learning that they want students to develop (outcomes). BD, created by Wiggins and McTighe, is a curriculum planning approach that encourages teachers to think first and foremost about the essential knowledge and skills that they want their students to acquire as a result of a unit and then consider assessments that measure attainment of those knowledge and skills before designing learning tasks and assignments that match the assessments. There are three stages of BD:

Stage 1: Identify desired results

In this stage, the question is, *What understandings, knowledge and skills will be gained as a result of the lesson?* These lesson and objectives are guided by state and local standards and form the backbone of the program of study.

Stage 2. Determine acceptable evidence

In this stage, the question is, *How will I assess students' growth in relation to the desired results?* Teachers consider ways to gather evidence of learning that include formal assessment, such as standardized testing, and informal assessment, such as performance-based tasks.

Stage 3. Plan learning experiences and instruction

In this stage, the question is, *What learning experiences will best support my students' learning?* Teachers align instructional planning with the standards-driven desired results as well as the acceptable evidence. These learning experiences ought to engage students and help them master the objectives.

Although a curriculum model like BD can seem like a constraint, it can provide structure that allows for more creativity. Once teachers determine stages 1 and 2, then they have the freedom to create lessons that are interesting and appealing and lead to lifelong learning.

Building Strong Content Knowledge

(Stage 1. Desired Results)

To give you an idea of how the Capacities of the Literate Individual and BD can be combined to help you support purposeful learning that can take place with the door open, let's consider the second Capacity of the Literate Individual, *Building Strong Content Knowledge*. Below is a description from the Common Core of the skills and knowledge that a literate individual must have in order to be able to build strong content knowledge:

Students establish a base of knowledge across a wide range of subject matter by engaging with works of quality and substance. They become proficient in new areas through research and study. They read purposefully and listen attentively to gain both general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise. They refine and share their knowledge through writing and speaking. (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/introduction/students-who-are-college-and-career-ready-in-reading-writing-speaking-listening-language/>)

Remember, the description of the literate individual is where we want students to be upon graduation. This is our *desired result*. The need for teachers in all subject areas to support students' development of skills related to building strong content knowledge is supported by a 2014 ACT report that only 26% of students who took the ACT meet the benchmark for college and career readiness in reading (4).

We believe that students are more likely to read purposefully and listen attentively if they believe that their reading serves a strong purpose. Service learning is a methodology that infuses greater purpose into students' schoolwork by connecting classroom content and skills with real-world needs.

According to Guilfoile and Ryan, Service-learning is one of several "deeper learning" strategies that states, districts, schools, and teachers may use to help

students gain a deeper understanding of core academic content and simultaneously build deeper learning skills through the integration of content knowledge with application. (3)

Below, you will read an example of a service learning experience that supports students' reading skills development. Before we share that, let's keep with our focus on BD and discuss how we would assess students' development in relation to this Capacity of the Literate Individual.

Using the Test to Inform Practice

(Stage 2. Evidence)

How might we gather evidence as to whether our students are progressing toward this desired result? The table below represents the key components of this Capacity of the Literate Individual and the ways that these components align with the following prompts from PARCC and a state exam:

Table 1. PARCC and State Exam Prompts

PARCC Grade 10 Research Simulation Task

In 1968 three students in Des Moines, Iowa arrived at their separate schools wearing black armbands to protest United States involvement in the Vietnam War. The principals of the schools quickly instituted a policy banning the wearing of armbands, leading to the suspension of the students. A lawsuit filed on behalf of the students was eventually argued in the Supreme Court on November 12, 1968. Today you will read two passages and listen to a short audio clip discussing the context and impact of the case. At the end of the task, you will be asked to write an analytical essay.

<http://epat-parcc.testnav.com/client/index.html#login?username=PT10E&password=Practice>

State Exam

(English I)

After reading "Hearing the Sweetest Songs," do you think the author considers herself disabled? Explain your answer and support it with evidence from the selection.

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2014, Short Answer #2.

Table 2. CLI (Building Strong Content Knowledge) and Test Components

CLI Components Test Components

Read purposefully PARCC—Students read the passages representing the majority opinion and the dissenting opinion of two judges on the case.

State Exam—Students read the passage.

Listen attentively PARCC—Students listen to an audio clip of a law professor discussing the impact of the case.

Share through writing and speaking PARCC and State Exam—Students write an analytical essay.

Since 21st Century research is evolving to include more than print sources, it makes sense that the PARCC prompt includes listening to audio clips and reading sources that would likely be found on the internet. This is representative of the types of sources that students will encounter in college and career.

Linking CLI, Assessment, and Instruction

(Stage 3. Learning Experiences)

How can we engage students in authentic learning experiences that help them develop the skills involved in building strong content knowledge? The following sample lesson scenario provides a frame for talking about instructional techniques that relate to this Capacity of the Literate Individual.

Maureen’s 9th grade class engaged in researching social issues that were important to them and that they believed would be important to younger students as well.

These issues included bullying, respecting elders, honoring our veterans, and helping adults learn to read. The 9th graders explored the issue through various sources: they read newspaper articles, analyzed information from websites of organizations, watched videos and listened to podcasts, and contacted local agencies to interview experts. The 9th graders also researched picture books related to the issue that would be appropriate for 3rd graders.

Based on their findings, the 9th graders designed lessons to teach third graders facts about these issues and to encourage sympathy and a desire to take action through the compelling stories that were told in the picture books. These lessons were approved by the third-grade teachers before they were delivered to the students. The 9th graders also showed innovation by designing an on-the-spot service activity for 3rd graders. For instance, some 3rd graders wrote thank-you cards to veterans or created alphabet books for adults who were learning to read. Before finalizing their

service plans, the 9th graders contacted local organizations that addressed the social issue on which they were focused to be sure that what they were asking the 3rd graders to make would truly be helpful to the populations they hoped to reach.

The research that the 9th graders conducted had value beyond earning a grade for writing a paper. Rather, they used their research to influence their lesson planning and their plans for service. In addition, their research was based on different sources of information. They accessed print sources and multi-media sources. They also conducted interviews with experts from local organizations. Talk about opening doors! This learning experience enabled elementary school teachers to see the ways that their former students were further developing their skills and it connected community members with the school, thus showcasing the ways that unconventional approaches can support meaningful, standards-based learning.

Let's look at this lesson through the lens of the CLI—*building strong content knowledge*.

Table 3. CLI (Building Strong Content Knowledge) and Lesson Components

CLI Components Lesson Components

Read purposefully Students read the articles and explore websites related to their social issue.

Listen attentively Students listen while viewing videos and podcasts that relate to their social issue.

Students listen during the phone interview to be sure that their plans will best suit the needs of the population they hope to reach.

Share through writing and speaking Students develop a formal lesson plan to be approved by the third grade teachers.

Students present information on their social issue to third graders.

The section above is one example of how we can link the three components: the Capacities of the Literate Individuals, instruction, and assessment. We can use assessment—whether it be standardized tests or authentic measures—to inform our instruction and help us reach our desired results. This can shift the way that we see

assessment. No longer do we need to close our doors when we want to skip traditional test prep; we can teach in creative and purposeful ways with our doors wide open when we use the Next Generation literacy skills that are tested to help guide how we design learning experiences. We see from table 3 that students are developing their reading, writing, listening, speaking, and research skills while building strong content knowledge which will help them succeed on the standardized exam, but more importantly in college, career, and beyond. This meaningful outcome is what all educators want.

Conclusion

Students aren't the only ones facing new and challenging assessment systems. We know that many teachers are feeling the pressures of new evaluation models and ratings systems that involve student test scores and classroom observations. Something that we hear frequently is that when administrators observe lessons, they circulate around the room and ask students what they are doing and why they are doing it. If we can utilize BD to make the connections between desired results, evidence, and instruction clear for students, and, more importantly, if our shared desired results include not only developing capacities for the literate individual but the potential for students to impact their society, we think the answers that students may give to administrators when asked "what are you doing and why are you doing it?" will give us the confidence to teach with our doors wide open.

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