

Best Practice and the Common Core

By Harvey
"Smokey"
Daniels

Remember when the Common Core famously promised to stay out of instruction? "These standards will not dictate how teachers should teach," the authors pledged in their introduction (2010). Then they served up a document that implicitly favored presentational, whole-class instruction; telling over showing; and "stand and deliver" over building knowledge with others.

Two years later, middle and high school teachers are being flooded with sample teaching units that dutifully enact this lockstep, teacher-centered pedagogy. One widely publicized example centers on Annie Dillard's essay "Living Like Weasels." This junior-year unit was developed by Achieve the Core, funded by the General Electric Foundation.

"Living Like Weasels" is three and a half pages long. The Achieve the Core unit plan is 20 pages long and comprises five class periods. The main procedure goes like this: kids silently read, then the teacher (or a "competent" student) reads aloud, then the teacher marches kids through a series of 18 factual recall and inferential questions, such as:

Q9. Describe what is meant by "stunned into stillness" drawing on evidence from paragraph 10.

Q12. Find evidence for what Dillard means by "living in necessity" in paragraph 14, and put her ideas into your own words in a brief two- or three-sentence paraphrase.



We can effectively meet the CCSS standards by using curiosity, rather than coercion, as instructional fuel.

Here we have *rigor* with a steaming side of *mortis*. Envisioning that classroom, I see twenty-seven kids snoozing while three or four teacher-pleasing Horshacks keep the lesson going.

This weasel unit is more of a literary waterboarding than an engagement with a complex text. That's no slight to Dillard's craft. Nor is the theme "instinct vs. civilization" a stretch—arguably it is the crux of adolescence. But this particular teaching plan simply doesn't get the job done.

The Seven Structures of Best Practice Teaching

In *Best Practice: Bringing Standards to Life in America's Classrooms* (2012), Steve Zemelman, Arthur Hyde, and I review the broad, decades-old consensus among a score of expert organizations (the NCTE, IRA, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, etc.) that define what highly effective teaching looks like. What it doesn't look like is day after day of "lecture-discussion."

Here are seven key best practice teaching structures we identified, with brief suggestions on how they can help teachers both engage students and "raise the bar." We can effectively meet the CCSS standards by using curiosity, rather than coercion, as instructional fuel.

1. Gradual Release of Responsibility

Intentionally or intuitively, powerful teachers often follow a deep sequence in their lessons: "First, I do it and you watch. Then we do it together. Then you do it on your own, with close support from me. Finally, you do it on your own." Real teachers don't just interrogate; they model, show, and demonstrate first. That means, for one thing, that English teachers frequently think aloud about text they have never seen before, to *show* students how a proficient reader approaches an unknown text.

2. Classroom Workshop

Whole-class lessons, where only one person at a time is talking, don't put nearly enough positive social pressure on kids to think and participate. Students take far more responsibility as members of an apprenticeship workshop, where they assign themselves tasks, set goals, and work with classmates to meet learning targets. In this structure, the teacher often gets off the stage and coaches learners side by side.

3. Strategic Thinking

More than ever, students need a flexible repertoire of cognitive moves that allow them to crack open hard texts—especially when the content is alien or background information is intentionally withheld. This means the explicit teaching of inferring, questioning, visualizing, connecting, determining importance, synthesizing, and self-monitoring is vital at all grade levels.

4. Collaborative Group Activities

The CCSS does endorse student collaboration in its Speaking and Listening standards, but few current sample units actually challenge kids to work, think, discuss, or write *with* each other. At a minimum, kids should be turning and talking with a partner at least *eight times per hour*. And they should be deployed in small groups regularly—after learning the behaviors required for productive small-group meetings. (you could call this the "Gradual Release of Social Skills.")



5. Integrative Units

Subject matter is far more memorable when it is encountered within broad integrative units about topics that matter in the world. "Inquiry circles" provide one model: under a curricular umbrella, teams of students commit to becoming experts in a field of knowledge and formally share their learning with others.

6. Representing to Learn

Sit 'n git never really works. Most students need to use all of their senses to process information: talk, movement, drama, drawing, music, and more. Such complex representations also help teachers assess what different learners really know.

7. Formative-Reflective Assessment

Teachers will soon face uber-high-stakes national examinations from the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia. The pressure to teach to these tests will be enormous. Meanwhile, students learn best when teachers help them find their next steps, using formative feedback, and when kids take significant responsibility for managing their own brains and assessing themselves. We can also use formative assessments to see whether kids are progressing toward the standards.

As we scramble to meet the CCS standards, let's keep our pedagogical standards high. We know that a genuinely challenging curriculum need not rule out curiosity, engagement, or—dare we say it—fun.

Harvey "Smokey" Daniels has been a city and suburban classroom teacher and a college professor. He now works as a national consultant and author on literacy education. Smokey is known for his pioneering work on student book clubs, as recounted in *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, and *Mini-Lessons for Literature Circles*. Smokey has recently coauthored four best-selling books on content-area literacy: *Texts and Lessons for Content-Area Reading: Comprehension & Collaboration*; *Subjects Matter*; and *Content-Area Writing*. He is also coauthor of the new *Best Practice, Fourth Edition* and *The Best Practice Video Companion*, as well as editor of *Comprehension Going Forward*.



To continue to engage with Smokey on this topic go to www.heinemann.com/pd/journal.