



Blog

Would You Eat a Test for Dinner?

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Standards vs. Curriculum



The Common Core tells you what to teach, doesn't it? It's simple. The standards list the desired learning outcomes, so just formulate tests with questions worded similarly to the outcomes and, *voilà*, teachers will teach the right things for kids to pass the test and thrive. Problem solved!

I've heard variations on this type of thinking often, especially from those who think that school improvement efforts can be completed by drafting dozens of "standards-aligned" test questions. They have bought into the myth that the test item is the skill and the skill is the standard. It almost sounds logical. But it misrepresents what constitutes curriculum or what it means to accomplish the standards.

Let's start with an example from the Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading. Anchor Standard 6 states that by graduation, students should be able to "Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text."

The grade-level reading standards for literature provide teachers with clues about what students need to learn along the way to accomplish this goal. So what happens before students can fully assess how point of view or purpose shapes a text? According to the standards for grades 3-5, they must first learn to

- distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters;
- compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations; and
- describe how a narrator or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

These set us in the right direction but only give a vague sketch of a path. With just the grade-level versions, would students really reach the anchor outcome?

To test student competency with these standards, the PARCC (one of two state consortia tests designed to evaluate performance on the Common Core) has students read a story and then answer a two-part question. First, students answer how the narrator and another character are similar, then they select the quotes from a list that reveal key points about the narrator and character.

Can that kind of test item fully address the standard? Standards are goals, like the daily nutritional guidelines that specify how much of each type of food you should eat. But if your family is anything like mine, they don't like to eat their servings of carbohydrates and proteins in isolation from the rest. How bland and boring.

They want a rich “*curriculum*.” You know the kind I mean: Linguini Bolognese with onions, carrots, tomatoes, brisket, and Parmigiano-Reggiano. The nutritional standards say we need dairy, but a good meal relies on the knowledge of *which kind* of cheese, not to mention *how much* seasoning, will make it taste good. Every parent knows that meeting nutritional standards is important, but if the food doesn't taste good enough to make the children willing to eat it, the nutrition goes to waste.



A reading curriculum is no more limited or determined by the standards and tests, than your dinner recipes should be by the nutritional standards. To teach one standard, you need to think hard about what it really entails, the range of conditions under which that skill will be needed, and what it's going to take to get there.

So what's the recipe for assessing the impact of point of view or purpose?

Gather Your Ingredients



For sure you will have to explain or model important concepts like author, narrator, and characters; point of view and perspective; and opinion and evidence. And you'll have to teach how to identify the views of the author, narrator, and characters, compare them with each other and with your own point of view, and understand what these ideas contribute to an overall interpretation of a literary text.

Just as importantly, as with any of the Reading Literature standards, you have big decisions to make about the types of texts that you want students to be reading. How complex should they be? Are you going to start with easy and gradually increase the difficulty? What about their lengths? Sure, you can start out with no more than a paragraph or a page, but don't you want kids to be able to develop their skills with longer texts, too, such as short stories, novellas, and novels? What will this progression look like, and will you connect this skill with multiple genres, like mystery, science fiction, historical fiction, or others?

Then there are also specific text complications inherent to this skill. Will narrator be an active character or more of a storyteller? Will they state their points of view explicitly or force students to make inferences? Will the text be first person, third person, or mixed perspective? Will the points of view be linked to the story's conflicts or more subtle aspects of the text?

Preparing the Main Dish

How will you teach the information? Now that you've got your major ingredients decided upon, it's time to get mixing, combining selected texts with specific instructional tools and strategies. Is there technology you need for the lesson(s)? When and how will you explain the various concepts? Will you use graphic organizers that help connect evidence with points of view?

What are you going to ask of students? Will you start them off with recognition tasks (like multiple choice) and work toward more constructive responses? Will they jigsaw the story, with different kids charting the perspectives of different characters? Will they talk about it in small-group or whole-class discussions and/or write their

responses? Are they only going to respond to specific skills exercises or will you require them to apply the concept in some larger task, like writing or broadcasting a book review?

A Well-Balanced Diet

It isn't generally a good idea to focus on a single concept like this, so you need to think about how lessons connect to the rest of the curriculum. Perhaps you could use a Point of View lesson to help them put their own perspectives into the stories they write. Or maybe you can link the ideas used in reading literature to the critical reading work with informational texts. And then, of course, there are the other literary reading standards and how they come together to make sense of a story.

A lot goes into constructing a curriculum that moves students closer to achieving proficiency in academic standards. As good as tests might be in recording what students have learned and evaluating their overall progress, they are lousy descriptions of what students need to be taught. Ultimately, you have to follow the standards, but to do that well requires that you plan and prepare full menus that are richer and more extensive than the standards or the tests.

Bon appétit.

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For more from Tim, read his [other posts](#) or view his [video](#) on research-based practices for K-3 reading comprehension, based on the [Practice Guide](#) on reading comprehension he chaired.



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