

## Globalizing the Common Core State Standards

Kathy G. Short

Two major movements are currently enveloping schools. On one side are the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English Language Arts (ELA), which have a tremendous impact on educational policy and on literacy instruction in K-12 schools. On the other side are global education and intercultural competence, which have been gathering momentum over the last ten years. Both are clearly important to the changing context of schools and society, and to the significance of critical thinking and intercultural competence for success in an increasingly interconnected and complex world.

Whether global education and the CCSS are in opposition to each other, able to peacefully coexist, or can build from and strengthen each other are critical issues for teachers who stand in the middle between these two movements. Some of the blogs, articles, and books that swirl around the CCSS champion its new possibilities for literacy instruction, while others give dire warnings of its fallacies and false promises. Close examination of these debates reveals that the standards do offer new possibilities for literacy instruction that could correct some of the imbalance from previous reform initiatives. At the same time, the standards are surrounded by public myths that misrepresent their content and intent, as well as questionable assumptions that were built into the standards by their original creators. Through critically examining these possibilities, myths and assumptions as they connect to global education and intercultural understanding, educators can come to a better understanding of whether it is possible to globalize the CCSS or if teachers will again find themselves caught in a tug of war between two opposing movements.

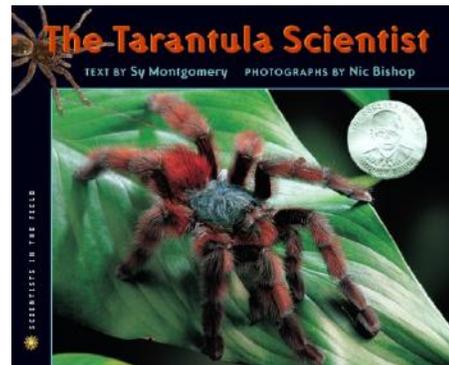
The three major emphases within the CCSS for ELA that connect to global education are informational texts, text complexity, and close reading. Each of these foci provides both tremendous potential and huge obstacles for encouraging students to develop global perspectives. Ironically, most of the obstacles have resulted from policy makers and educators not engaging in close reading of the standards themselves, and so they can be fairly easily challenged and addressed by a close examination of the original standards document. The assumptions that are built into the standards are more subtle and much more difficult to address, which could create significant barriers for global education. Those barriers, however, are not insurmountable once educators are aware of their existence and can take positive action to globalize their approach to implementing the standards in their classrooms and schools.

### The Balance of Informational and Literary Text in Children's Lives

One aspect of the Common Core State Standards that has received a great deal of attention is the increased focus on informational texts. The CCSS document calls for 50/50 split between informational and literary texts in kindergarten, gradually increasing to a 70/30 split in high school. This shift in the balance of texts has received praise from those who believe that schools have focused too strongly on literary texts and failed to prepare students for reading the types of informational texts that daily fill their lives in college and in careers. This shift is also seen as important in engaging readers who prefer nonfiction to fiction for their own personal reading. Although there are differing statistics, researchers argue that only 10-15 percent of the texts read aloud by many teachers in primary classrooms are nonfiction (Duke, 2003).

Myths about this focus on informational text are plentiful, but the most serious is the belief that fiction or literary texts are no longer valued or important in schools. A second grade teacher in Tucson sent home a message to parents, asking them to read informational books on topics such as animals and solar system to their children, noting some fiction was okay – but only in very small quantities. Another administrator asked the school librarian to weed out as much of the fiction collection as possible and purchase only nonfiction texts as replacements. These directives are based on the belief that since informational books are receiving more emphasis, fiction is thus devalued. This belief is a misunderstanding of the standards, which are an attempt to correct an imbalance, not to establish a new imbalance where students are not reading enough fiction.

A related misconception is that 70 percent of the texts students read in their high school English classrooms should be informational. This, too, is definitely not the intention. The 70 percent relates to the kind of reading that students do across the day in math, science, social studies and other content classes and is a percentage that probably already characterizes most high schools. English teachers are encouraged to use more short informational texts, such as primary sources that can be found online and in newspapers to surround their reading of a novel, but not to switch their reading to primarily informational text. In fact, students need to primarily read literary texts in English in order to have 30 percent of their day be fiction reading.



A questionable assumption that is embedded in the standards is that fiction consists of narrative text structures – writing that tells a story – while informational texts use expository text structures – writing that explains. This distinction is overly simplistic as fiction and nonfiction both use narrative and expository writing and text structures. A science information book, such as *The Tarantula Scientist* by Sy Montgomery (2004)

includes the story of that scientist's life along with information on tarantulas. Nonfiction books often introduce readers to the community and practices of science and history; they don't just give facts. In fact, Newkirk (2014) argues informational text that engages readers always uses a narrative arc as the foundation because narrative is not a text type or a genre, but a mode of thinking.

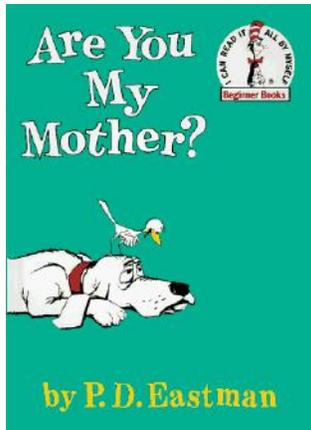
The same is true of literary fiction – the story may be fictional but readers also learn as they read, because authors have embedded their own careful research into the stories. *Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys (2011) is a powerful novel about a fictional family's struggle to survive when they are sent to a work camp in Siberia, but also includes factual information about Stalin's invasion and policies in Lithuania. The difference is that informational books are about real events, people, places, and ideas that are not made up, while anything can be made up in fiction.

Connecting the emphasis on information texts to global perspectives raises several critical issues, particularly the lack of informational books on global issues and cultures. The vast majority of global literature available in the U.S. written by insiders from specific global cultures is fiction, with some memoirs and biographies that represent only one type of nonfiction. Very few informational books are translated or imported from global cultures into the U.S. Informational books by U.S. authors set in global cultures are more readily available, but are a small percentage of the large number of informational books published annually for children. Teachers who want to use global informational texts will need to make extensive use of the internet. The Library of Congress provides access to primary sources at <https://www.loc.gov/> and Primary Source, <https://www.primarysource.org/>, has online curriculum units with documents and photographs.

An imbalance of literary and informational text in global inquiries is highly problematic. Using only informational texts can perpetuate a tourist perspective of gaining facts that remain on the surface of a culture without a deep understanding of the lives and values of people within that culture. Fiction immerses readers in character's lives and thinking and allows them to experience that culture and to create caring relationships. Stories that are authentic representations of cultures allow students to live through the characters and go beyond superficial understandings of culture. Literature can help children see how people within that culture actually think and believe and how they view their world. They can see how their own lives and needs for belonging and safety connect in fundamental ways with children in another part of the world as well as what makes those children's lives and ways of thinking unique and distinctive.

An exclusive use of fiction is also problematic in global inquiries. Story provides a single point of view, one family or character, while nonfiction develops an understanding of the extent of an issue or problem in our world. Nonfiction provides definitions, terminology, and facts to make the issues real – not just an interesting

story, but something actually happening in the world. Through story, students understand the human emotions and struggles related to issues, and, through nonfiction, they explore the broader world context of those issues.



At Van Home Elementary School, we found that students who engaged in an inquiry about hunger needed both stories and informational texts to understand this global issue (Thomas & Short, 2009). They needed to explore the extent of the problem of hunger, especially since most had not experienced hunger themselves. Hunger affects many people in the world and the results are dire, going far beyond the stomach rumblings that students associated with being hungry. We noticed that the characters in fiction usually found solutions to hunger that did not reflect the realities of on-going chronic hunger.

Informational texts helped students develop an understanding of the extent and severity of the problem and the lack of easy solutions, along with a recognition that the problem exists in their own community as well as around the world. Fiction humanized the numbers. Through story, they came to feel empathy and sympathy for those who go hungry and through information about the extent and causes of problem, they came to feel the need to get involved and be socially responsible.

### Myths and Assumptions about Text Exemplars

One issue of major concern to educators is the grade-level lists of text exemplars that are included in Appendix C of the CCSS ([http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_C.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_C.pdf)). Many schools and some states interpret these lists of stories, poems, and informational texts as core reading lists for all students, and mandate these texts for classroom use. A close reading of the standards document indicates that the list and text excerpts are provided to help teachers explore the levels of complexity and quality of texts recommended for a particular grade level, so they can make their own informed selections. The lists are thus exemplars of text complexity, not a mandated reading list.

Because the goal of the group developing the standards was to show text complexity, they needed to provide excerpts from each of the selected texts. Publishers charge large permission fees for the right to use excerpts from their books and so the use of many older and out-of-print books as part of the text exemplars is not surprising. For example, the stories listed as exemplars for K-1 were published between 1957 and 1978, with only one recent book. Not only is there no global or multicultural diversity in settings or characters, only one book even has people in it – the others are about only animals. Many of the books are classics, such as *Are You My Mother?* (1960) by P.D. Eastman (1960) and *Frog and Toad Together* by Arnold Lobel (1972), found in most school and classroom libraries. Children have loved these books for many years, but they are not, and should never be considered, a core list for K-1 classrooms. The same

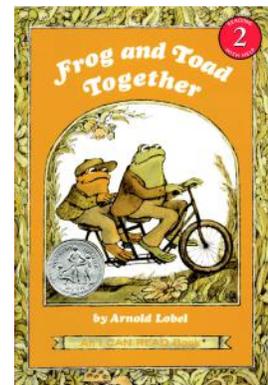
issues are evident in the text exemplars at the high school level, which are dominated by classics such as *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes (1605) and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austin (1813).

This misinterpretation of text exemplars as a mandated reading list, rather than as examples of text complexity, is highly problematic and creates a context in which students are restricted to books that are dated and lacking in diversity. Without balancing the classics with the richness of contemporary literature, students would soon come to the conclusion that books are of little relevance to their personal lives, discouraging their continued engagement as readers – not exactly the goal of teachers and schools.

The current text exemplar lists also offset the goals of multicultural and global education because of the absence of global and cultural diversity in the titles. Even the culturally diverse titles that are included in the lists reflect the potential for major misunderstandings. For example, two Latino texts that are included in the K-1 lists are both historical, reflecting a view of Latino culture as dated and set back in time.

### Myths and Assumptions about Text Complexity

The Common Core State Standards have focused attention on text complexity, arguing that students need to engage with texts that gradually increase in difficulty of ideas and textual structures, based on the belief that schools have not been rigorous in providing difficult texts. This focus on rigor in reading emphasizes the goal that students understand the level of texts necessary for success in college and careers by the time they graduate from high school. The problem is that decisions about text complexity in schools are often based in myths that have arisen from misconceptions about the standards.



The first myth is that text complexity is solely determined by Lexile levels ([www.lexile.com](http://www.lexile.com)), and that schools should level books around Lexile ratings in order to ensure that students read increasingly difficult texts. The CCSS guidelines clearly state that text complexity is determined by three dimensions, only one of which is readability, the quantitative use of formulas involving word familiarity, word length, and sentence length. The other two dimensions, given equal weight, involve the qualitative judgments of educators. The second dimension is the informed decisions of teachers and librarians about the difficulty of a text based on levels of meaning with a text, the use of straightforward organizational structures or more confusing structures like flashbacks, language that is clear and contemporary rather than archaic or unfamiliar, and the kinds of life experiences and knowledge necessary to understand the text. The third dimension is a consideration of the fit between a text and a particular reader as determined by

examining the experiences and strategies of readers related to the task. (See Appendix A of CCSS, [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf))

Readability formulas such as Lexiles assume that longer and less familiar words and long sentences automatically make a text difficult. Although sentence length and word choice are important, a student's prior knowledge or interest in a topic cannot be factored into a formula. The formulas also have difficulty measuring conceptual difficulty, the complexity of the ideas in a book and how these ideas are presented. Symbolism, abstraction, and figurative language contribute to the complexity of ideas, just as the use of nonlinear plots or shifting points of view contribute to the complexity of the plot. *Skellig* (Almond, 1999) is a British magical realism novel in which two children become involved with an otherworldly being hidden in a garage. The text has easy vocabulary and short sentences with a readability of around Grade 3.5. Yet the concepts of spirituality, faith, and prejudice cast the conceptual level of this novel much higher, making it more appropriate for students who are 11-15, depending on the background of the specific student. Another example is John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which scores at a 2nd-3rd grade level on quantitative measures because it uses familiar words and short sentences as part of dialogue. Teachers, however, note that the many layers of meaning and mature themes indicate that this book is meant for grades 6 and above.

The Common Core State Standards document recommends the Lexile Framework, but notes that this framework is not accurate or useful for K-1 reading materials, poetry, and complex narrative fiction for young adults. This exclusion of a large number of texts does not take into account the complex issues of global literature where readability formulas do not evaluate the match between the cultural knowledge of readers and the cultural content and text structures of a particular book. Clearly, readers familiar with a specific global culture will find books from that culture to be less complex and more easily understandable. Those readers not only bring strong cultural knowledge but also are familiar with that culture's style of storytelling and text structures. The assigned Lexile levels will most likely be higher than the actual difficulty of these books for readers who are cultural insiders and have familiarity with the events, people, perspectives, and values at the heart of these books.

Readers from outside that culture will struggle more with that same text. This struggle, however, is important because, in global literature, we want readers to struggle – to recognize that this book cannot easily fit into their existing perceptions about how people in other cultures think and live. We want readers to stumble and have to reread and to feel discomfort, as well as to connect with characters and identify universal experiences and feelings. A book could be much more difficult for a reader than its Lexile level and still be appropriate for that reader.

In addition, quantitative measures of readability fail to identify the influence of a reader's interest in a particular book or the ways in which that book is integrated into

a unit of study in a classroom. These measures assume that the reading of a text is in isolation from other texts, which is rarely the case with global literature because teachers know these books need support. When a reading of a book is accompanied by readings of other texts and a range of experiences, research, and discussion, that book becomes much more “readable” and less complex for readers, regardless of its assigned Lexile level. The assumption that texts are read independently of each other is based in old models of literary instruction at high school and college levels that no longer reflect actual practice in classrooms, especially in elementary classrooms where teachers often embed informational and literary texts within rich units of inquiry.

The misconceptions surrounding Lexile levels are partially a result of not carefully reading the actual CCSS documents and appendices and partially a limited understanding of classrooms and readers by the creators of these documents. In arguing that teachers have not been rigorous and have not adequately considered text complexity, the CCSS creators, in turn, have failed to understand the complexity of real readers in real classrooms engaged in inquiries about compelling tensions and issues. Simplistic assumptions about readers and classrooms do not result in useful understandings about text complexity.

### **Myths and Assumptions about Close Reading**

The Common Core State Standards put a major emphasis on the close reading of texts, recommending that students find and cite evidence in the text as they discuss key ideas and details, craft and structure, and knowledge and ideas. Text analysis is viewed as bringing rigor to reading with an emphasis on higher-level critical reading skills. Any text read to or by students is used for instructional purposes – to teach something. If students respond to a text by talking about what it reminds them of from their lives, teachers are to steer students back to the task and ask them to talk about what the story is about – to get the details and to support their statements by citing evidence in the text. Text-dependent questions and evidence, not connection, are valued.

One myth that has arisen from this focus on close reading is that some schools have urged teachers to return to the use of literal level questions that are highly text dependent, rather than the higher-level thinking actually encouraged within the standards. The major issue with close reading, however, is not misconceptions of the standards but assumptions by the creators of the standards that are based in their misunderstanding of reader response.

The assumption of the writers of the standards is that reader response does not include text analysis and stays at a simple level of personal connections that do not lead to critical thinking. Although reader response does begin with personal connections and interpretations, readers are then encouraged to move into an analysis of their responses through dialogue based on evidence from their lives and the text to develop their interpretations. Rosenblatt (1938) reminds us that first we need to

respond as human beings, to share our experiences of that story, before we use the text to teach. Literature was not written to teach a strategy but to illuminate life. The first questions we should ask are, "What are you thinking? What connections did you make?" instead of "What was the text about?" and "How does the text work?" These personal connections and responses are essential, but not sufficient, as readers then need to dialogue about their interpretations, critiquing those interpretations and examining whether they are supported by evidence from their lives and the text. Our first response to a text should not violate the nature of the text itself as an experience of life. The second response can then move into close reading of that text and the evidence should come from both the text and our lives.

Teaching something from a text should come after personal response and dialogue, after readers have a chance to see that text as significant. That teaching should focus on one aspect of a text or one reading strategy. Beating a text to death with skill after skill is counterproductive – the reader walks away determined never to return to the text again and with little retention of the skills. By choosing one text structure or reading strategy, teachers provide a focus for students to explore and come to understand without destroying the text. It's much more useful for students to examine one or two significant metaphors in a particular work of Shakespeare, for example, than to identify every metaphor in that work.

These issues are particularly significant in global literature where readers need to read critically, which requires both personal response and text analysis. If readers are only engaged in text analysis, as recommended by the CCSS, they do not learn to question the text itself and the assumptions about society on which the text is based. They circle around within the text, engaging in evaluation but not critique. When readers engage in both personal connection and text analysis, they move between perspectives to critique and challenge what exists in society and to examine who benefits from these inequities as well as to imagine new possibilities (Freire, 1978). We need to go outside the world of the text to challenge that world and bring the text back to our lives to challenge our views and ways of living. Encouraging readers to only engage in close reading keeps the text distant and separate from our lives--we read as spectators instead of immersing ourselves in experiences that connect us to and take us beyond our lives.

The focus on close text-based reading in CCSS returns us to narrow definitions of what and how students read. History indicates that this type of textual criticism, known as "New Criticism," has turned off many generations of students because it lacks purpose, meaning, and relevancy to ideas and issues that students care about. Many adults have painful memories of sitting in college English classes, struggling to come up with the "right" interpretation of the assigned text and taking a text apart piece by piece, destroying interest in and enjoyment of that text. Our connections and thinking were not valued and we saw no relevance for that reading in our own lives. Rosenblatt provided a powerful indictment of this approach to literary analysis in

1938 and her critique remains valid today. We do not need to choose between personal connection and close reading; the choice is not either/or but both. The risk of ignoring that choice is another generation of readers who avoid reading because it is painful schoolwork, instead of meaningful life work.

### Final Reflections

John Dewey (1938) argued that we live in an either/or society and so often swing from one extreme to another. We need to avoid those dichotomies and look for ways to balance and integrate these various dimensions in new ways instead of setting up oppositions. Fiction versus nonfiction and literary versus informational text are examples of false oppositions that can have negative consequences for students as readers and human beings. More significantly for those of us who are engaged in global curriculum and in developing intercultural understanding, these dichotomies work against these goals and the possibilities of global literature for opening the world.

### References

- Almond, D. (1999). *Skellig*. New York: Delacorte.
- Austin, J. (1813). *Pride and prejudice*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- de Cervantes, M. (1605). *Don Quixote*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Education and experience*. New York: Collier.
- Duke, N. K. (2000). 3.6 minutes a day: the scarcity of informational texts in first grade. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35(2), 202–225.
- Eastman, P.D. (1960). *Are you my mother?* New York: Random House.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Lobel, A. (1970). *Frog and Toad are friends*. New York: Harper.
- Montgomery, S. (2004). *The tarantula scientist*. Photos Nic Bishop. New York: Houghton.
- Newkirk, T. (2014). *Minds made for stories: How we really read and write informational and persuasive text*. Portsmouth, ME: Stenhouse.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1938). *Literature as exploration*. Chicago: Modern Language Association
- Sepetys, R. (2011). *Between shades of gray*. New York: Philomel.
- Steinbeck, J. (1939). *The grapes of wrath*. New York: Penguin.
- Thomas, L. & Short, K. (2009). *Integrating fiction and nonfiction texts to build deep understanding*. *WOW Stories*, 1(3). <http://wowlit.org/on-line/publications/stories/storiesi3/7/>

**Kathy G. Short** is a professor in the Language, Reading and Culture program at the University of Arizona, where she teaches courses in global literature and inquiry.