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"Without Contraries": Casting a Critical Eye on the Common Core COMMENTARY

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"Without contraries is no progression."
William Blake

A year ago we, as members of the Executive Committee at a Kentucky state institution charged with aligning college academics to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), created a report for *KJECTL* (Summer 2012) about our progress in complying with Senate Bill 1 (SB1), even detailing a website we jointly created with the state. Interestingly, our institution has a current Quality Enhancement Plan that it "will graduate informed critical and creative thinkers who communicate effectively." This year we want to demonstrate some of that critical thinking by evaluating the CCSS argument both through our experience and with what various commentators are saying. Ultimately, Blake is correct; if an enterprise is to prosper, it must be able to withstand scrutiny.

The most pervasive criticism of the CCSS is that its implementation will result in a "dumbing-down" rather than a raising of students' performances. In a recent editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, Gass and Chieppo (2013) examine their own state, concluding that "Massachusetts dropped its own standards in 2010 . . . in adopting the flawed standards of the Common Core." As evidence, they point to English: "Compared with Massachusetts' former standards, Common Core English standards reduce by 60% the amount of classic literature, poetry and drama that students will read" (A15). To be fair, the Bay State has always had higher standards than most states. At the same time, in fact, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, argues that the CCSS are more rigorous than the standards used by three-quarters of the states (Hollingsworth, 2013).

Another common criticism of the CCSS is the lack of assessment. These standards have been adopted more as a common barometer than as a time-tested methodology for improving American education. Gass and Chieppo, for example, conclude that neither the federal government nor the D.C. group supporting the CCSS "can point to a program of theirs that has clearly improved student achievement in the past two decades" (A15). Obviously, these standards are so new that no longitudinal assessments have been completed so as to evaluate their effectiveness. When New York, one of the first states to test students *viz a viz* the CCSS, tried an assessment in the spring of 2013, many students and parents complained that the questions could not be answered in the required time and that the assessment brought about extreme stress.

Others criticize the ratifying states for supporting an incomplete program (which sounds strangely like what Congress did with ObamaCare). Kentucky, of course, signed on in 2009 before the Common Core truly existed, and the Social Studies Assessment, Curriculum, and Instruction Collaborative (SSACI) has yet to publish its framework for social studies. Moreover, the focus of these standards seems to be on the speed of implementation. Writing in *Shreveport's The Times*, Barry Erwin (2013) comments that, "If there is a lesson to be learned from . . . other states, it would be that Common Core is most successful when proper time and support are given to train teachers and prepare students prior to testing" (Opinionline, 9A).

The standards in math are often singled out as ineffective, which, with the United States slipping in world math rankings, is a major disappointment. In fact, the World Economic Forum recently ranked American math and science education 48th (Frenkel and Wu, 2013). So, while Frenkel and Wu believe everyone “should oppose efforts to scale back the hard-won and necessary Common Core Standards” (A15), critics such as Michelle Malkin (2013) refer to “fuzzy, dumbed-down Common Core math and reading guidelines” (25).

Poor students may be hampered by testing based on Common Core standards, and unfortunately these are the students who need the most help. According to Susan Spicka (2013), “Children in districts with high levels of poverty will be especially vulnerable to the new Common Core tests What they reliably show is which students have come to school well-fed, well-rested and well taken care of” (Opinionline, 9A).

Still another criticism is that of over-reaching authority. Many believe that the curriculum is a local school board issue, not something that should be imposed on a national level. The CCSS initiative has been funded and championed by Bill Gates and the national Governors. Some worry that by using the federal government’s Race to the Top funding, Big Brother is rearing his Orwellian head. Some believe that maximally states should keep the decision-making in determining what their students should know and be able to do.

The lack of emphasis on creative thinking deeply troubles us. Nowhere does a CCSS standard address the need for 21st-century thinkers to develop this skill. In fact, one could make a good argument that the imposition of the CCSS in a test-heavy environment will actually destroy the creative impulse. Couple that supposition with the CCSS promoting less imaginative reading where students can even inadvertently absorb such skills as metaphor and glimmer-catching, and American students could be winning the race to the bottom. A 2010 study by IBM of over a thousand CEOs in this country determined that the number-one skill that businesses want higher education to inculcate is creative thinking, a job that will be made harder after a generation of CCSS students enters the halls of academia in 2024. To be fair, Kentucky’s KDE website under its 10th grade on-demand writing end of course assessment lists this standard: “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.” Unfortunately, creative thinking, much like literacy, needs to be addressed across the curriculum, not just in one of the arts.

Finally, last April we facilitated an Impact Seminar with all of EKU’s CCSS professional learning communities—math, English/reading, natural sciences, social sciences, and teacher prep--and one large problem area emerged that cut across the entire Common Core, literacy. According to Nelson (2013), an analysis “of statewide ACT testing in 2010 found that only 31 percent of 11th-grade students could be considered ‘college- and career-ready’ under the Common Core when evaluated on reading a complex text.” As a result, our focus in AY 2013-4 will be in promoting higher literacy, and our plan of attack is to hold cross-campus fora that focus on literacy skills that ALL disciplines can teach.

As we write this commentary (June 2013), Banchemo (2013) notes that even though 45 states have adopted the CCSS, Indiana and Indiana have put their decision to adopt on hold, and “Legislatures in Michigan, Alabama and several other states are considering anti-Common Core bills Sen. Charles Grassley (R, Iowa) is seeking to prohibit federal funding for any Common Core efforts” (A3). In short, critics appear to think that the CCSS Initiative is moving too quickly, actually lowering standards, and being implemented before research and assessment offer proof of its efficacy.

Blake might be happier if this troublesome concept of a runaway train called the CCSS Initiative were at least slowed down so that the tracks ahead could be checked.

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