

Letter from America Summer 2010

In the previous edition of *Writing in Education*, I discussed the issue of teaching credentials (or the lack thereof) in the United States. Within the context of that discussion, I mentioned that the US does not have national benchmarks – education, like a lot of things, I noted, tends to be regulated at the local level. So it was with some interest that I read a June 2, 2010 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled “New National Standards Seek to Make All Students Ready for College” (*college*, in US parlance, means *university*).

According to the article, “[t]he National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers collaborated with educators, researchers, and other experts to write the [Common Core State Standards](#), which outline specific expectations for what students should learn across all subjects in kindergarten through fifth grade.” Kindergarten starts when a child is about five years old; in the fifth grade, a child would be ten or eleven years old.

The group also developed standards for English, math, history, science, and technical subjects for students in the sixth to twelfth grades – or ages eleven through eighteen. Although creative writing is not mentioned specifically, either in the article or within the Common Core State Standards themselves, there could potentially be indirect influences on our university-level creative writing programs (courses), in terms of better students and higher enrollments. As things currently stand, it seems fair to say that the students who opt to study Creative Writing at university level are likely to have had reasonable training in the earlier parts of their educations, especially within English literature. Students who lack confidence in their academic writing would seem, anecdotally at least, less inclined to choose Creative Writing as a course of study.

In an interview, Terry W. Hartle, senior vice president for government and public affairs at the American Council on Education, told *The Chronicle* that “having states work toward common standards for preparing students could help reduce the number of people who need extra academic preparation once they reach college.” He went on to say, “‘If you're academically prepared for college, you're far more likely to graduate.’”

I am extrapolating from the article, but if Mr. Hartle’s prediction is correct, it would seem that universities would spend less money on remedial instruction and would gain income by lowering the drop-out rate. And while I’m fantasizing – maybe universities would spend some of that windfall on core academic programs, like English and Creative Writing. It’s a nice idea.

However, it relies on a belief in the transformative power of benchmarks. Having worked in the UK for five years and written many a course document, I’m not convinced that having benchmarks actually translates into different or better results. Maybe there is some data out there that proves they do improve education. I haven’t seen it. But I often felt that benchmarks were a bit like horoscopes – they sounded profound but were, necessarily, vague enough to be meaningless. It’s a good impulse to have a wish list, a set of ideals – and to try to have a national conversation about those goals. But it seems to me that declaring the goals does not address the underlying problems our school systems face – like budget shortfalls or community poverty or high levels of staff turnover.

Below is an excerpt from the Common Core State Standards for Fourth Grade Language Arts (kids are nine or ten years old):

[Students will] read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.

a. Read on-level text with purpose and understanding.

b. Read on-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings.

c. Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.

To me, these goals are so obvious, it's painful. Aren't they saying that a teacher's goal is to help a student read at a level that's appropriate to his or her age? And isn't that what teachers already try to do? Presenting a teacher at a beleaguered school with this document would be like saying to a comedian who's bombing on stage, "Hey, I have an idea – be funnier!"

Maybe I'm the only one who feels this way. It wouldn't be the first time. Regardless, if you're interested in checking out the article in *The Chronicle of Education* (where you'll see an interesting array of responses to the Standards – both for and against) or the Common Core State Standards themselves, go to these websites:

<http://chronicle.com/article/New-National-Standards-Seek/65752/>

http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf

Kathy Flann