

What English classes should look like in Common Core era

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The recent controversy over how much fiction and non-fiction high school students are supposed to read under the Common Core State Standards begged the question of where the 70 percent non-fiction 30 percent fiction for seniors actually came from and how English classes should look. Here Carol Jago, a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, explains. She has taught high school for 32 years and is associate director of the California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA. She is the author of "With Rigor for All: Meeting Common Core Standards for Reading Literature and Classics in the Classroom."--Valerie Strauss

By Carol Jago

The claim that the Common Core State Standards have abolished the teaching of literature makes for a great headline. Who wouldn't get hot and bothered over the idea that high school students will no longer be reading "Romeo and Juliet," "The Crucible," and "Invisible Man?" I would be up in arms, too. Fortunately, nothing in the standards supports this claim.

What seems to be causing confusion are the comparative recommended percentages for informational and literary text cited in the Common Core's introduction. These percentages reflect the [2009 NAEP Reading Framework](#). I served on that framework committee and can assure you that when we determined that 70% of what students would be asked to read for the 12th grade NAEP reading assessment would be informational, we did not mean that 70% of what students read in senior English should be informational text. The National Assessment for Educational Progress does not measure performance in English class. It measures performance in reading, reading across the disciplines and throughout the school day.

Of course, for many high school students the only reading they are assigned is in English, AP History, or IB classes. Will Fitzhugh, founder of the extraordinary and exemplary Concord Review, has long decried the absence of history books on high school reading lists. Too many students make their way across the stage at graduation without having read a single work of history. How can we call high school classes "college prep" when students are never asked to write a single long paper requiring research? The Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects (that means everybody

else) make it clear that students need to be reading and writing across the curriculum.

It may be the case that in some schools high school English teachers are being told to cut back on the poetry and teach more informational text. I'm hoping this mistaken directive can soon be reversed. English teachers need to teach more poetry, more fiction, more drama, and more literary nonfiction. More is more when it comes to reading. And we have evidence to prove it. Just released [vocabulary results from the 2011 NAEP Reading Assessment](#) demonstrate a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. And how do students build their vocabularies? Not by memorizing lists of words or playing word games but by reading complex text.

I know what you are thinking. How will it ever be possible to have students read more then when they won't do homework? You have identified an issue we need as a society to address. I'm not talking here about busywork homework or fill-in-the-blanks or create a diorama projects. I'm talking about reading books. Common Core reading standard 10 calls for students to "read and comprehend literature ... independently and proficiently." If students are not reading independently, i.e. at home, on their own, turning pages or flipping screens, they will never read proficiently.

If you are thinking that today's busy, over-programmed kids don't have time for reading, I urge you to consider the [2010 Kaiser Family Media Study](#). Their research reports that young people ages 8-18 consume on average 7 1/2 hours of entertainment media per day: playing video games, watching television, and social networking. These are the same students who tell their teachers they don't have time to read. Children have time. Unfortunately like Bartleby, they would simply prefer not to.

To reverse this trend we need to make English classrooms vibrant places where compelling conversations about great works of literature take place every day. They need to be spaces where anyone who didn't do the homework reading feels left out. They need to be places where students compare the lives of the Joads as they left the Dust Bowl to travel west to California in "Grapes of Wrath" with the lives of those who stayed behind through seven years with no rain in Timothy Egan's "The Worst Hard Time" (winner of the 2006 National Book Award for Nonfiction). I'm not talking about force-feeding students but rather inviting them to partake of the richest fare literature has to offer. One thing I know for sure. The teenagers I taught were always hungry.

With Steven Greenblatt, author of "The Swerve: How the World Became Modern" — a Pulitzer Prize-winning example of literary nonfiction — I believe with all my

heart that, “literature is the most astonishing technological means humans have created to capture experience.” Let’s use that technology to make real change in America’s schools.

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