The Uncommon Core

Essential creativity skills and the grammar of new media are missing from the Common Core English Language Arts Standards.

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The United States neglects creativity in its education system. To see this, just look at the Common Core State Standards. If you search the English Language Arts and Literacy standards for the words creative, innovative, and original—and any associated terms, you will find scant mention of the words and the ideas they represent. Readers should find this troubling.

Supporters of the new standards will likely note that creativity relates more to instructional methodology than to literacy and that the Common Core initiative leaves choices about methodology to teacher practitioners. Although this deference to teachers’ judgment is appreciated, there are three problems with this reasoning.

First, producing something innovative is as real an exercise as producing many of the traditional literacy artifacts cited in the standards, such as grammatical sentences and well-developed essays. Our tendency to shroud creativity in an aura of impenetrable mystery prevents educators from seeing creative production as a practical skill that every student can and should develop—just like the ability to read and write.
Second, it’s safe to assume that the Common Core initiative will drive standardized testing, which makes it as much a threat as an inspiration. Nearly every state has signed on, making the standards ubiquitous. Students’ mastery of the competencies outlined in the standards will become the benchmark against which most students, teachers, schools, districts, and states will be judged. The end result will be that policy groups—from school boards to state and federal agencies—will have a rationale to avoid embracing creativity as a skill in school.

The third—and most urgent—reason to be concerned about this failure to address creativity is that the standards fail to support the United States’ reputation for creativity in the global community. This country hasn’t been competitive in the arena of labor costs for some time. We’re losing our edge in information processing. Everything from technical support for printers to app development can be purchased in the global marketplace, where information workers throughout the world compete quite effectively. Where the United States has maintained its edge is in entrepreneurial ideas that produce economic growth in science, technology, and the arts.

Our insistence on clinging to a high-stakes testing culture that pursues limited notions of intelligence at the expense of developing the skills of innovation puts us at risk of becoming a poor nation. As Yong Zhao (2012) notes, researchers who compare scores on the Programme for International Student Assessment with measures of creativity like patent filings and Global Entrepreneurship Monitor scores find that countries that do well on standardized tests typically perform poorly on creativity markers.

What the Standards Lack
At this point in history, certain competencies and understandings should be outlined in our basic literacy standards. I have four suggestions for what we should add to the new standards, all tied to creativity and technology.

First, artistic skill should become accepted as a foundational literacy—the 4th R. Second, schools should embrace the grammar of new media as clearly as the new standards embrace grammar related to words. Third, we need to teach creativity and critical thinking together (because they work in tandem in any innovative venture). Fourth, teachers must explicitly teach students how to innovate and must provide opportunities for them to innovate, particularly in relation to technology and living a digital lifestyle.

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What Is Creativity?
Before we discuss my proposal in detail, let’s define creativity. There’s so much research related to creativity and the creative process that defining it is as problematic as defining intelligence. A solid working definition comes from researcher Steven Pfeiffer (2013): To be creative is to produce something original and useful.

Alane Starko (2010) echoes this idea, noting that creativity involves the ability to produce something novel (not in an absolute sense, but new to the student) and appropriate. Zhao (2012) actually calls for evaluating students’ progress in terms of their ability to
produce innovative products. I’d add to these criteria Sir Ken Robinson’s (2011) notion that all creativity involves the informed use of some sort of media. Using a medium can be low-tech—for example, carrying a tune with the human voice—or complex, such as producing a holographic living space. For today’s student, creativity almost certainly involves using some kind of digital medium.

They limit “literacy” to a facility with words and numbers—basically, the 3Rs. People can assuredly be creative in how they use words and in certain realms of mathematics. But traditional forms of literacy now coexist with a new form: the creative, well-designed *media collage*, which involves putting several elements together creatively. The most common media collage is the web page, but a number of other media constructs also qualify, including videos, digital stories, mashups, stand-and-deliver PowerPoint presentations, games, and virtual environments (Ohler, 2009). In addition, we are seeing the inclusion of media that involve senses beyond sight and sound, including movement and touch. We encounter the media collage whenever we enter the vast mediascape of the Internet, which has become everyone’s second home.

Synthesizing these components yields this definition: Creativity involves creating something that is new to the student, that is appropriate or useful, and that demonstrates a command of some kind of media. With this in mind, let’s consider what a set of standards that honors the creative imperative might include.

**Four Ways to Include Creativity**

1. **Adopt Art as the 4th R**

   The Common Core standards are clear, detailed, helpful, and above all, representative of common notions of literacy. But they have a structural constraint: this environment calls on our abilities to craft a mix of images, animation, music, and other elements, as well as text. In short, being literate in the 21st century requires each of us to be a designer and a multimedia artist.

   The limited notion of literacy found in the Common Core standards goes to the heart of the cultural schism that pervades our view of the purpose of schooling. On the one hand, the public loves to call for the arts and creativity as part of a general plea for educational excellence. We listen raptly to Thomas Friedman and Yong Zhao, who warn us that ignoring creativity at school leaves our children wholly unprepared for the world that awaits them. On the other hand, we continue to support school systems driven by high-stakes testing that concentrates only on the traditional literacies and content areas.

   I don’t see the schism closing anytime soon. Educators are left to build bridges to span the divide. There’s no better place to start than to treat art as the 4th R, as a literacy rather than simply a content area.

   If the creators of the standards had recognized art as a foundational literacy, some would have considered it prescient. By my account, this move would have been simply realistic and long overdue. There’s no question that words will continue to be an important medium. But text-centrism has yielded to the media collage as the new foundational literacy in many areas of life. If the test of a literacy is whether it functions as a language across disciplines, as do letters and numbers, then the media collage clearly qualifies.

   It’s important to distinguish between teaching about the arts in education and teaching artistic skill in education. Although the former is crucial for a full education, it’s the latter that demands we embrace art as literacy. As long as art is considered a content area, its fortunes will shift with the politics of the time. As a literacy, it will become untouchable.
2. Teach Media Grammar
Marshall McLuhan (1964) recognized that every new medium has its own grammar. Part of the shift from the 3 Rs to the 4 Rs involves recognizing and teaching the grammars of the new media. Doing so will help students speak the “language” that media artists use.

The Common Core standards in English language arts and literacy do reference the importance of new media. And the standards do a good job of acknowledging the need for students to learn to read web material critically so they can separate fact from spin. What we don’t find are references to “media grammar”—guidelines people use to develop successful media. Whereas there are standards that address the correct use of prepositions, linking words, and other conventions of traditional writing, there’s nothing like that for multimedia texts—such as a standard addressing how to coordinate music, images, and voice narrations.

The realist in me isn’t surprised. Grammatical conventions have evolved slowly, over many years, since literacy first entered mainstream culture. But we’re just now entering an era in which the opportunity to make media has shifted from an elite few to anyone with a computer, an Internet connection, and an imagination. This shift is irreversible and spreading, making it clear that we should consider the grammar associated with this new language.

3. Adopt “Creatical” Thinking
Critical thinking and creativity are considered at odds in our approach to schooling. Having standards that reflect the need for both would be immensely helpful. Having standards that blend both into an integrated approach to problem solving would be ideal.

Neuroscientists disagree about the degree to which analytic and creative ways of thinking are really split between the left hemisphere of the brain (for analytical thinking) and the right (for creative). Regardless of whether it’s scientifically valid, the idea of such a split works well as a metaphor to describe the two parts of our psyche that seem to have been at war ever since the industrial age pitted rationalists against romantics.

Currently, the “left brain” side is winning the hearts and minds of our school systems. Education planners have great respect for critical thinking, but they tend to view creative thinking as a specialist’s language for art majors and gifted students. This is certainly a misguided view; creative thinking is important in any field of work, and it is everyone’s birthright.

The real shame isn’t that one side is winning but that we endorse the separation of these two important human perspectives instead of blending them into one integrated approach to learning, living, and working. Sir Ken Robinson (2011) describes the inescapable relationship between creativity and critical thinking: “Creativity is not only about generating ideas; it involves making judgments about them” (p. 302). Critical thinking, Robinson says, is part of the iterative nature of the creative process. People work on creating something original by entering the “flow” state identified by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) but then back away from that state to analyze their work. This continues throughout the development process.

This is particularly true in an age of digital tools. Creators in most endeavors can now do something that heretofore was impossible or very difficult: erase. Modifying an oil painting or a handwritten manuscript is tedious and messy. But adjusting a photograph using Photoshop, or a document using word processing, is routine. Anyone with tools and tenacity can now craft something new by creating something, thinking critically about that piece of work, and modifying it. Creative and critical thinking are inextricably intertwined—which is why I propose the term creatical thinking.

There are tremendous benefits to this comprehensive approach to problem solving. Most notably, it leads to valuing the development of new ideas, rather than just thinking critically about others’ ideas. When we encourage creatical thinking, students become not just problem solvers, but also problem finders (Starko, 2010).

4. Spur Thinking About Technology
There are many ways to teach divergent thinking and creativity. Here I’ll suggest several ways to help students think creatively—or creatically—about one topic: technology and the digital lifestyles they lead. Two key ways to spur students’ thinking about technology are (1) encourage them to be innovators—to add to the global conversation about new inventions—and (2) help them identify solutions for complex societal challenges (such as global warming or how to live peacefully in a multicultural society).

Students as innovators. An effective way to get students thinking is through what I call the technology innovation game. A teacher describes several ways that innovation generally occurs and then asks students to use each of those ways to come up with something novel and useful. For example, innovation...
often occurs through sequencing—building on prior innovation. Recall that suitcases didn’t used to have wheels. Then someone created a suitcase with two wheels. Now many suitcases have four wheels. What helpful improvement on the suitcase might come next?

I’ve pitched this question to students, who then produced amazing renditions of future suitcases, with elements like GPS tracking devices and built-in digital scales that check whether a suitcase is over a weight limit—or suitcases that steer themselves. Once they worked through the suitcase example, I’d have students brainstorm improvements to technology-based products; it’s important that students use their skills not only as problem solvers, but also as problem finders.

Another way innovation happens is through confluence, the intersection of innovations. Most technologies are combinations of other technologies. To help students understand confluence, I tell them to look around and imagine how they might combine any two technologies they happen to see. What might they produce by combining Twitter and a voice synthesizer? A cell phone and a refrigerator?

Because we want technology to be beneficial, I tell students to imagine a practical goal that their hybrid invention could fulfill. I encourage them to relate this goal to a career they’re interested in. One student considering a future in physical therapy suggested connecting a Wii (a device that tracks body movement) to the Internet so a physical therapist could diagnose an injury from afar. The possibilities are endless.

Students as problem solvers—and problem finders. We should encourage students to identify and grapple with societal problems (some that exist as a result of living a technology-infused lifestyle) and imagine how technology could be used to generate solutions. Technology always both connects and disconnects. Once we recognize certain disconnections that technology brings to people’s lives, we can often find a way to use those technologies to reconnect people’s lives in more helpful ways.

For example, consider the fact that most images people see on the Internet have been manipulated to some degree—often without our knowing it. One group of 7th graders identified this issue as important. They suggested that images posted on the web should bear a number from 1 to 10 indicating the degree of manipulation. Imagine how you’d react to a photo on a news site that was labeled a 7 (highly manipulated). These teens then grappled with how to detect manipulation, which kinds of manipulation actually matter (in terms of changing a photo’s meaning), and so on. They were probing much deeper into their digital lifestyles than they normally do.

A Natural Endeavor

We tend to forget that the impetus to create literacy standards wasn’t to have standards; it was to ensure that students are engaged and useful in the workplace and the social commons. Literacy is simply the means by which we view it. Mention the word creativity, and many people think of the lone artist or inventor, hidden in a loft, laboring to create things that we’ll all eventually want but that only the creator truly understands. We need to debunk this image. Creative endeavor is a natural part of who we are. We need to stop ignoring that fact and begin valuing creativity in schools.

As our students head further into the 21st century, they’ll face extraordinary challenges to make the world a safe, inspiring place. Better test scores may not help them meet those challenges. But creative ideas, along with command of the literacies of their day, just might.

Standards that don’t address creativity fail to support the United States’ reputation for creativity in the global community.

References


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