

Student-centered Approach to Iowa Core Literacy with Sarah Brown Wessling Transcript

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My name is Rita Martens and I am the Department of Education's lead consultant for the Iowa Core. In this presentation Sarah Brown Wessling, the 2010 National Teacher of the Year and an English teacher at Johnston High School in Johnston, IA, and I will discuss the new Literacy standards and their potential impact on classrooms.

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These are the learning goals for today's webcast:

- Participants will extend their understanding of the new standards in Literacy.
- Think about implementing the new standards with a student-centered approach.
- Think about how the standards will impact teaching and learning in their classrooms.

As we approach these goals, our discussion will be broad in nature and will not hone in on specific strategies or lesson plan design.

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As you probably know, the current standards for literacy in grades K through 12 that are part of the Iowa Core have resulted in a marriage, so to speak, of the National Common Core State Standards and the essential concepts and skills of the Iowa Core. Through an alignment study between the Common Core in English Language Arts and the essential concepts of the Iowa Core in literacy, we were able to identify many similarities and a few significant differences between the two. This information allowed the State Board of Education to adopt the Common Core standards with a few additions last July. This "marriage" is now what constitutes the Iowa Core in Literacy for grades K -12.

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With me today is Sarah Brown Wessling. Sarah is the 2010 National Teacher of the Year. She is an English teacher at Johnston High School in Johnston, IA, where she served as English Department chairperson for a number of years. Sarah is a nationally board certified teacher and also the current president of the Iowa Council of Teachers of English. One of her recent projects has been to co-author a book for the National Council of Teachers of English on interpreting the National Common Core Standards.

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Today, I've prepared a series of questions for Sarah.

First, Sarah, the introduction to the new Iowa Core standards describes that these standards are intended to define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, but do not define how teachers are to teach them. As the National Teacher of the Year and an Iowa classroom teacher, what advice might you have about how a teacher might best approach these new standards?

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First of all, thank you so much for inviting me to participate in the discussion. I think this a great way for teachers across the state to have access to some ways for us to make sense of what's in front of us. First of all, I think it's incredibly important to note that these are national standards, not a national curriculum. A lot of times we have people who interchange those phrases and I think that it's important that we don't because this difference is especially crucial as we frame our approach to making sense of the standards. So I thought it would be help if I shared how I approach making sense of the standards in three different perspectives.

The first perspective is as a learner. It was incredibly helpful for me to read the entire standards document to see how they progress and change from one grade to the next, not just starting or focusing on the high school where I spend my time in the classroom but starting at the kindergarten level. I looked for patterns in the language of the standards and tried to determine what the standards are advocating for . I certainly noticed that there is more non-fiction, texts no longer in isolation of each other, writing that is more of a logical argument than an emotional persuasion, and the need for lots of evidence to support comprehension. Once I felt as though I had a sense of the document, I was ready to think about it from a second perspective.

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My second "read" was as a student. I thought about what these standards would mean to me if I was the one sitting on the other end of them, if I was the one sitting in the classroom. I found this process to be really beneficial for me because when I've looked at these kinds of documents before, I usually read them as a teacher first and so my knee jerk reaction is to get kind of defensive and just try to say "I do this, I do this" in an effort to check-off or prove what I've already do. So when I step back and read this from the perspective of a student it reminded me of the importance of maintaining the integrity of my classroom, which means keeping my focus on the students' learning while imbedding the standards into best practice.

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So finally, the last way I approached these standards was with a very wide lens, asking myself, "What is the spirit of the standards?" I thought about integration of modes of literacy. I thought about how it challenges me to ask new kinds of questions. I also thought about what the standards didn't include and what that meant. I'm still going to make visual literacy, poetry, creative writing an integral part of a literacy experience for my students even though those items are not given as much text in the standards as other skills. By taking the panoramic view, I see how those initial patterns I recognized in my first reading do apply to the vital parts of a literacy experience that are not necessarily named in the Common Core State Standards.

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What excites you about the new standards?

There's a lot that excites me about the new standards. I think I am most excited that teachers will have a common language in which to talk about and discuss some of the concrete aspects of a language arts curriculum. I think so often we do not have the opportunity to share a common language. And now only do we have commonalities across the state but also from one state to the next. I think that this will really allow us to utilize the resources of one another. I think that the only other time I've had this experience has been when I've

scored AP exams, when I did the National Boards. That sense of common language was important in our ability to talk about effective instruction. So I am excited about that. I'm also excited that the standards document, for any given grade, is relatively concise. You can look at the standards that you have to work with. If you look at the anchor standards they are all on a single page – that's manageable. What I think is so important about that is don't end up working with a hundred different benchmarks that ends up forcing us to do a hundred different assignments. Rather the limited number of standards really allows us to create our own curriculum and see how our best practices shows up in those standards. Also I am very excited that there is a clear sense that literacy is also discipline specific and that each discipline has a specific literacy to it. In other words, these patterns of literacy apply to teachers of science, social science, and the humanities. That's all integrated in this. I think it's so authentic when we look at it that way. I also really liked the definition of text complexity that takes into consideration the context in which the reader first approaches any given text. I think that text complexity component will be really important for us as we work with the standards.

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On the other hand, what concerns you?

For as much as they excite me, certainly there are a few concerns that I have as well. Although I think that the first two that I talk about may not have the far reaching implications as the last. So the first one is that there is a lack of explicit attention to visual literacy in the language of the standards. Each state has its discretionary 15% that can be added and I would strongly advocate for us to add that because it is foundational to 21st century learning, to meeting students where they are, and so important in understanding the rest of the work.

I also worry about the lack of language that addresses creative works and poetry, in favor of writing arguments. While I think that there are still teachers who will include poetry and creative work into their curriculums but because it's not explicitly in there I think some people may not give it attention. So we need to remember that regardless of how logical any given argument may be, without a sense of voice, I think this kind of writing could become formulaic and flat.

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The third concern could easily exacerbate the others. I worry about how the standards will be interpreted. I worry that teachers will sit in professional development sessions with a pencil and have to scratch off each standard they "cover." I worry that the interpretation will create programs, formulas, and generally robotic appeasement to the standards. Of course, this is entirely contrary to the "spirit" of a student-centered classroom and certainly contrary to the exemplars which represent the kind of complex, thought-provoking work we want to see in our students. We need to remember that we are still teaching *people* and that implementing the standard doesn't mean capitulating to a factory model of learning.

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I've heard the new standards described as moving from "an essentially teacher centered oral education with visual and text-based support to a text-based writer centered education with oral and visual support." Do you agree with that? If so, how do you think that changes pedagogy in English Language Arts classrooms? In social studies and science classrooms?

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I think that these standards will certainly ask the students to demonstrate complex understandings by writing in complex ways. For example, it won't be enough to compose a narrative; rather, that narrative will need to explore a complex concept, challenging the writer to effectively communicate synthesized understandings on this high level. If the student is generating this work and the teacher is guiding his or her process, then I do think this shift is implicit in the CCSS.

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Perhaps what this means for all of us in all of these disciplines, is that we have to be learners first, that we have to be ready to help different students all wrestle with different complexities. I think it means that we have to be experts of the content of our discipline. By content expert, I don't mean that we know the "facts" of our discipline, but rather the process of our discipline. Before we can teach students how to write and think like a scientist, like an historian, like a literary critic, we first have to be one ourself.

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These standards set a high bar for reading complex texts – how does a teacher motivate students to dig into texts with that level of complexity?

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Sometimes I talk about a "myth of motivation. Sometimes, in schools, often operate under this myth that if we ask our students to do something complex, they simply won't want to do it. I would argue that our students do want to be challenged and what they don't want is pandering. They want to learn for relevant, meaningful reasons; not because "this is on the test." Not because this is what they are going to need to know next year, not because this is what they are going to need to know in college. They need reasons that matter today. That's part of our daily challenge -- to discover why our students would want to read a complex text. What about that text speaks to them? To their questions, to their motivations, to their passions? I don't think there's any one answer to the motivation question. I think there are 150: one for each student in our classrooms.

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That said, I think there are some concrete steps that can help us manage this. I've just finished co-authoring a book for NCTE in which I spent quite a bit of time digging into the notion of text complexity. I think we need to consider designing our units with the spirit of the CCSS in mind. In short, we need to have an overlapping of three kinds of texts: context, fulcrum and texture. The fulcrum text is the principle text of any given study. However, before delving into the complexities of that fulcrum text is the "context" text where we think about which texts we'll use to meet students where they are; to frontload. So that means this might be a series of short texts or anchor texts, something from the news yesterday or something from a newscast recently. After we've frontloaded and we've worked with our context text, we carefully juxtapose (a reoccurring theme in the CCSS) that fulcrum text with another. When we start to have text talk to each other we get "texture" or "nuance" so they are not seen in isolation anymore. What we want to stop doing is stop teaching the book, the novel, taking the tests, and not talking about it anymore; going to the next one, reading the text, taking the test,

and not talking about it anymore. We need to see how the texts work together constantly to help form these larger understandings and meanings.

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Using evidence to support opinions and claims is a skill that is emphasized in the literacy standards. Most English teachers would see this as being taught through students analyzing and developing literacy analyses and research papers. How can we make these very traditional approaches to English instruction student-centered?

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Certainly writing literary analysis and research papers are one way to have students delve into argument and that you could certainly maintain a student-centered classroom where this kind of work is present. I don't think just because you are doing literary analysis and its traditional, that means you have a teacher-centered classroom. But certainly we can move beyond this as well. When the focus is on the process, on individual student growth, on providing scaffolding, then you'll see many student-centered concepts in place. Yet, I think part of our challenge is still not succumbing to a robotic curriculum. Remember, it's the curriculum that we are creating – we didn't create the standards but we do have choices in how we take these standards and merge them with what's best for our students. And this means that we have to give students experiences, not assignments, in which they flex and strengthen those rhetorical muscles. Are we asking our students to delve into cognitive complexity, to engage in experiences that have value beyond school? Instead of looking at a list of standards and imagining a separate assignment for each, what if we looked at that same list and envisioned an experience in which many standards from various strands of literacy collapsed?

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Thanks, Sarah, for sharing some of your insights with us. You've given me, and I'm sure everyone who listens to the webcast, an opportunity to think about not only the content of the new literacy standards, but also how they could impact teachers' day-to-day practice in their classrooms.

If you've got questions about the new standards in literacy or any of the other information presented in the webcast, don't hesitate to contact me. My contact information is on this slide.

Sarah, I'm sure you'll join me in thanking those who listened to this webcast today.