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Creative Writing Programs as Supplement to the Common Core Standards to Support Literacy among Inner-City High School Students

Author Note

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Keywords: Education, English, Common Core State Standards, creative writing, spoken word, performance poetry, literacy
Abstract

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards by Ohio in 2010 created a path of tightly organized learning targets that educators would take to ensure that students graduated with the literacy skills necessary to succeed in college and the workforce. The focus of these standards rests largely on the use of informational and nonfiction texts to supplement critical thinking and analysis. What may be lacking is an emphasis on the arts and creative writing as valuable assets to strengthening complex literacy and emotional and social development. Since creative writing is not heavily present in the Common Core, schools may resort to additional programs to provide this outlet to students. This research essay examines the program set in place by Young Chicago Authors, and the ways in which the city of Akron, Ohio could adopt such a model.
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Common Core in the English Language Arts Classroom

The Common Core State Standards were adopted by Ohio’s state Board of Education in June 2010. The standards, serving as the primary framework for curriculum development in schools, continue to face opposition based on what a number of researchers, educators, and parents feel they lack. The greatest criticism of the Standards for English Language Arts is the minimal attention given to creativity (Ohler, 2010). The vision statement of the standards is as follows:

“The [Common Core] standards anchor the document and define general, cross-disciplinary literacy expectations that must be met for students to be prepared to enter college and workforce training programs ready to succeed. The K–12 grade-specific standards define end-of-year expectations and a cumulative progression designed to enable students to meet college and career readiness expectations no later than the end of high school. The College and Career Readiness and high school (grades 9–12) standards work in tandem to define the college and career readiness line—the former providing broad standards, the latter providing additional specificity. Hence, both should be considered when developing college and career readiness assessments.”

Educational researcher Jason Ohler claims that the Common Core misses a few critical points that could greatly add to student development. He explains that the Standards aim to promote literacy, however they are absent of crucial literacy fundamentals, one of which is the promotion of students as artists. In Ohler’s article, *The Uncommon Core*, he writes “The limited notion of literacy in the Common Core standards goes to the heart of the schism that pervades our view of the purpose of schooling” (44) and this ultimately threatens the United States’ reputation as a creative powerhouse (46). Similarly, author Barbara Bartholomew questions the
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way in which the Standards address Language Arts education. She claims that as educators adopt the components of Common Core teaching, “the likely result will be classrooms built on the idea of English as communication—of text with a sender, a message, and a receiver. Likely to recede is the traditional focus reflecting the classical ideal that through literature we come to understand patterns and truths within ourselves” (84). Bartholomew notes that the general direction of the Standards aims to replace the personal narrative with texted-based analysis. Since the literacy standards span English and History, the aim is to promote cross-curricular focus and equip students with skills that they can carry to other subject areas. The use of nonfiction is perhaps the most efficient avenue to take to teach these skills, but is creativity suffering in the process?

The standards’ website lists the key shifts to be visible in English language arts instruction as regular practice with complex texts and their academic language, reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational, and building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015). This leaves a series of questions for teachers and schools administrators to discern. First, it must be determined what qualifies as a complex text. Along with the level of complexity of a text, educators must choose the balance between literature and information text in their class curriculums. The language used in the standards themselves seems to suggest a heavier emphasis on informational text. Lastly, the qualification of nonfiction as content-rich can be incredibly subjective. The novels once thought of as classroom-appropriate for their real-world themes and enjoyable plotlines could be accused of being too light in nature. There is no definite answer to the question of what content must be covered in the realm of fiction literature.

The Common Core arguably makes the art of teaching mechanical. Teachers must refer to the standards in order to adopt their student learning objectives accordingly, and for many this
restricts the content they wish to bring into their lessons. The focus of the English language arts standards is divided into four primary categories: reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015). Within these four areas, educators in grades Kindergarten through 12 are provided with twenty-six key pieces of criteria which they must integrate into their units to ensure students are given the opportunity to learn and master each one.

**What is literacy?**

The mark of literacy as defined by the standards is the ability to analyze words and phrases, explain author’s point of view, examine alternate points of view, and evaluate information presented in various forms of media (CCSS, 15). These skills are indeed critical for any high school student to take away from his or her English classes. There seems to be some confusion, however, surrounding what texts to use in order to help students build these skills. The concern of teachers of language and literature derives from the emphasis on non-fiction texts. The standards promote the literacy of complex texts, but there is a greater value placed on the complexity of technical and informational pieces than on novels, poetry, and ranges of fiction. Students should certainly grasp the importance of a wide variety of texts as they prepare for the college environment, where they will be exposed to both stories and instructional manuals regardless of their career path. Professionals in the field of education fear that the Common Core will begin classroom culture in which the analytical skills needed to process information texts will overshadow the ability to use creative reasoning for the analysis of fiction literature (Bartholomew, 2012).
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Creative Writing as a Supplement to the Standards

The Common Core State Standards are positive in nature; however they make some assumptions about the students who are subject to them. First, in order to make the standards successful, schools must have access to the funds necessary to purchase the materials that enable students to excel in the area of text literacy. Traditional classrooms are likely full of book collections that have been stacked for decades. If these texts do not seemingly align with the Common Core, they are unusable; if they do align, the material is likely outdated and difficult for students to connect to. In order for the English student to excel in the subject, there must be a perceived relevance of the material to their lives and present circumstances (Morrell, 2002, p.72). The best way to achieve this relevance is by incorporating content from modern culture in a way that suits a group of students’ learning desires and established learning needs. This may involve the use of music, art, contemporary literature, or poetry. In terms of literacy, students can learn the skills needed to identify and analyze text properties by being active creators, not passive readers.

Education professor Ernest Morrell claims that his greatest success in the classroom has come through the integration of popular culture into his lessons; in the urban classroom this has included the use of hip-hop elements in poetry and literature units. According to Morrell, “social context and cultural diversity significantly affect the literacy process” (p. 72). Students will connect with material that is culturally relevant to them, and for those in the inner-city that relevant context looks much different than a student in a rural community or the suburbs. Hip-hop culture has manifested largely through the popularity of spoken word culture. Spoken word is performance poetry and, according to educator Glenn North, “[spoken word] tends to demonstrate a heavy use of rhythm, improvisation, free association, rhymes, rich poetic phrases,
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word play and slang. It is more aggressive and ‘in your face’ than more traditional forms of poetry” (2008, p.1) As North explains, this art form is highly engaging and incorporates knowledge of technique, language and overall communication style; a spoken word piece is written with an audience in mind. While the culture of spoken word is closely tied to hip-hop and contemporary elements, performance poetry is not a new concept. Poetry readings have engaged audiences, youth included, for decades and serve as a way to give writers greater ownership of their work or perhaps deepen their relationship with the work of another.

A particularly successful example of this comes through the program created in Young Chicago Authors. The mission statement of the organization proclaims that Young Chicago Authors (YCA) “creates a culture that transforms the lives of young people and their communities by bringing together participants through writing, publication, and performance education for civic discourse and community celebration” (2014). The organization’s co-founder Kevin Coval explained in a personal interview that students need ownership and freedom in the creative process. He then went on to explain that the creative process is not solely for art’s sake, but also for the development of individuals’ emotional development and social confidence (personal communication, March 20, 2014). Coval moved toward creating Young Chicago Authors as a way to motivate and inspire Chicago high school students who often exist on the outskirts of the societal margin.

Addressing Diversity

According to the Ohio Department of Education, there were over 400,000 students enlisted in schools classified as being in communities of High or Very High poverty levels (Ohio
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Department of Education, 2013). The chart below offers the typology report for 2013 among public schools in Ohio.

2013 School Districts Typology- Chart A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2013 Typology Code</th>
<th>Major Grouping</th>
<th>Full Descriptor</th>
<th>Districts Within Typology</th>
<th>Students Within Typology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Rural - High Student Poverty &amp; Small Student Population</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>170,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Rural - Average Student Poverty &amp; Very Small Student Population</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>110,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Small Town</td>
<td>Small Town - Low Student Poverty &amp; Small Student Population</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>185,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Small Town</td>
<td>Small Town - High Student Poverty &amp; Average Student Population Size</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Suburban - Low Student Poverty &amp; Average Student Population Size</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>320,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The variation in levels of socioeconomic status between districts is vast. While some schools likely have adequate resources to provide books and literacy tools to students, others are faced with budget shortfalls that limits what they can offer.

Diversity is perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome in following the goals of the Common Core. Public high schools are experiencing increases in English language learners; Ohio experienced a 38% increase in ELL students from 2006 to 2011 (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). Students who begin learning English as their second language are not only faced with that challenge in itself, but also with the challenge of adapting to the expectations of literacy set forth by the Common Core that their native English-speaking peers are not fully
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acclimated to. The absence of emphasis on creativity withholds freedom from all students, and especially limits ELL students who could use that creative freedom to develop a level of connection and familiarity to the language they are learning.

The value of creativity with special attention to diversity is addressed in research by Professor David Keplinger, of The University of Southern Colorado. Keplinger explains that he used creative writing workshops as a way to establish a level of comfort to students who were not fully versed in the English language. He facilitated writing and critique sessions, in which students were given time to share thoughts on the work of well-known English authors and then have their own writing peer-edited in a safe classroom environment. The critical aspect to this system working was vulnerability, and according to Keplinger, students slowly adapted to sharing their thoughts with the rest of the group (2001, p.3) This approach helped students develop their voices as individuals, written and verbally; and guided his English language-learners to a place in which they valued the perspective and emotion of language more than the mechanics (2001, p.2). The argument made by researchers like Keplinger rest on the same principle; students must be given ownership of their literacy-learning experience. From the sharing of ideas in a reading circle to poetry readings on stage, students excel when they use their voice and know it is being heard. This system diverges from the call of the Common Core to establish practical skills and not necessarily artistic expression.

The Model

The example of Young Chicago Authors, particularly its branch-off event, *Louder than a Bomb*, can be examined for its qualities as both an outlet for the arts and also as a supplement to practical classroom learning. *Louder than a Bomb* is a youth poetry festival that occurs annually
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in Chicago and most recently in Cincinnati, Ohio (2015). The festival is set up as a competition where students from public high schools across the state showcase their written work through performances at varying levels. The festival takes place each year from February to March and as the event’s mission statement describes, “Of the 4,000 young people served in Chicago through the various year-round [Young Chicago Authors] programs in writing, publication, and performance education, approximately 68% are African-American and 18% are Hispanic-Latino. More than half of those populations come from low-income households” (Louder than a Bomb, 2014).

The key to making this event a success is declaring it the incentive of a year’s worth of preparation in and out of the public high school classroom. In an interview with Kevin Coval, the project’s creator, the program was explained that high schools through Chicago have increasingly joined the spoken word movement and created teams to attend Louder than a Bomb. These teams are generally run by English teachers, and all students in grades 9 through 12 are encouraged to join. Teams often meet weekly to discuss poetry techniques and fundamentals, and to provide student with constructed time to write the pieces they will eventually perform (personal communication, March 2014).

While Louder than a Bomb appears to be recreational venture to some bystanders, it is truly supplying inner-city students with a range of skills. All students are welcomed to join the program, regardless of whether their school has a team for the competition. However, the students who participate as part of a formal team are subject to an advantage, in that they are part of a network that operates for several months to sharpen not only performance technique, but fundamental literacy skills. The act of sharing one’s written work begins to remove the barrier of fear that so often restricts adolescents from feeling like they can constructively share their ideas.
Creative Writing Programs as Means to Literacy (Keplinger, 2001, p.3). *Louder than a Bomb* as an event creates an anticipatory conversation between teachers and students that lasts for months. Students who train for the competition on a team not only build the trust and confidence to share their work, but also to listen to the ideas of other young authors.

Academic literacy involves engaging with, creating, and competently discussing texts (Morrell, 2002, p. 72). By this measure, a creative writing outlet like Young Chicago Authors is the ideal environment for inner-city youth to achieve this. The program provides a supportive network of teachers and staff, and perhaps more important a community of students seeking similar goals. The Common Core requires students to identify pieces of a text and explain their importance, and performance poetry could be the most authentic means of doing this. Infiltrating the classroom with such a relevant culture trend holds the potential to engage students beyond poetry. If students feel that they have been given ownership of English language arts, they will likely comply with texts outside of fiction; however, the connection must first be made there.

**The Potential for Akron**

The Akron Public Schools District is the fifth largest in the state of Ohio, featuring nine high schools and approximately 22,000 students. The demographic, referring back to Chart A, is grouped as “Urban” and ranks high in poverty with an 86% free and reduced lunch rate (Akron Public Schools, 2015). The district’s demographic and size make it an area with incredible potential to model after Young Chicago Authors. If one high school were to facilitate a creative writing program, other schools would soon follow suit.

One invaluable asset the district has is the accessibility of The University of Akron. The resources available through staff and fundraising tools at the University could make it possible
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for such a creative writing program as *Louder than a Bomb* to become a sustainable piece of youth culture in Akron. The relationship between Akron Public Schools and The University of Akron would provide incentive for students to engage writing as a means of pursuing a college education; if poetry readings were held on the University’s campus, students would gain meaningful perspective and likely envision themselves beyond the high school classroom.

The University of Cincinnati became a partner with *Louder than a Bomb* in Cincinnati in 2014. The connection provides support to high school students through the writing process in the form of on-campus writing workshops; the partnership also allows students a viable network of faculty to work with and improve their college readiness skills (Louder than a Bomb Cincy Team, 2015). If the city of Akron and the Akron Public School District were to embrace the implementation of creative writing programs for students in the community, there would likely be a visible increase in English classroom performance, and overall student confidence.

**Conclusion**

Research generously supports the claim that creative writing produces positive academic effects for high school students. In discussing those students who live in the inner-city, the cultural trends point toward the art of performance and spoken word poetry as the avenues of connecting them to literature. Strong readers can be made from strong writers. Students given the chance to excel in creating their own work will likely engage more thoroughly in the While the intentions of the Common Core are noble, there is an evident lack of attention provided to the area of creativity and the importance of supporting students in their artistic and expressive endeavors.
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When creative writing is not heavily present in the day-to-day classroom, programs like those set forth by Young Chicago Authors offer the components of cultural relevance and individualized learning that serves as supplemental to the foundations of literacy. Spoken word is a well-illustrated example of how students can engage in purposeful communication while organically learning principles of rhyme, repetition, and figurative language (North, 2008, p.2).
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