

Fall 2016

## **You Can't Get There from Here: Cross-sector Collaboration and the Common Core State Standards**

Jason Depolo

Nancy Gardner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/crosspol>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

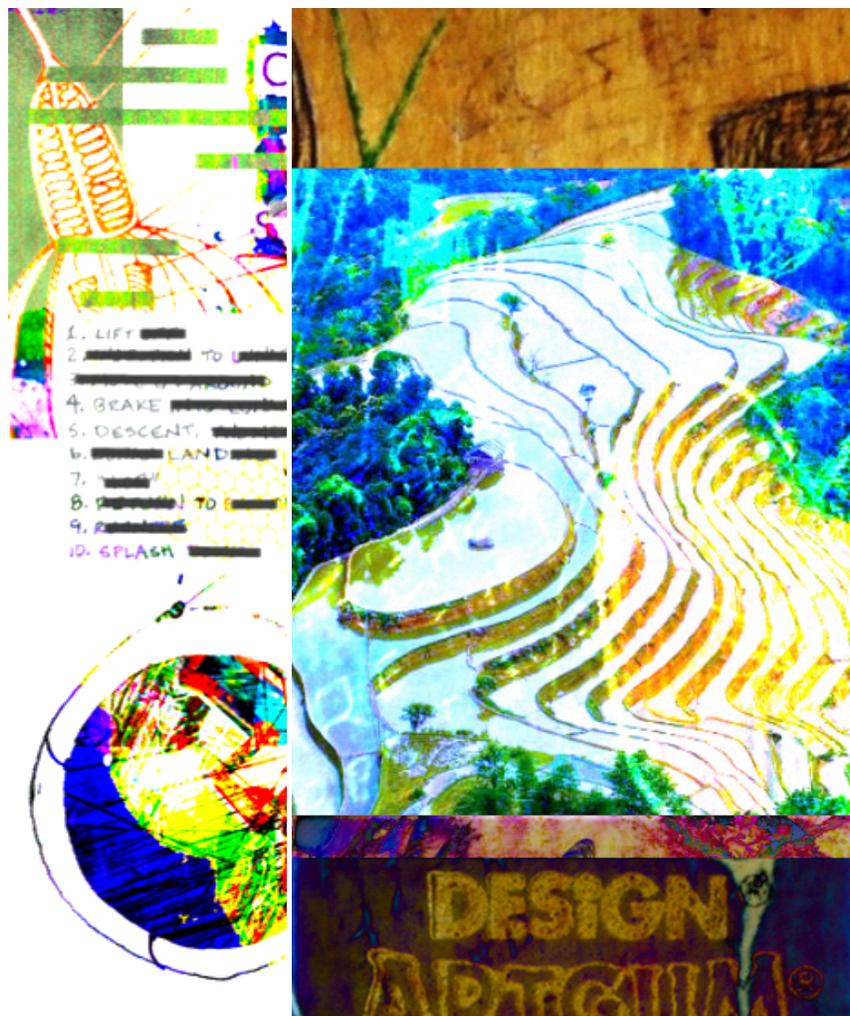
### **Recommended Citation**

Depolo, J. & Gardner, N. (2016). You Can't Get There from Here: Cross-sector Collaboration and the Common Core State Standards. *Crosspol: A Journal of Transitions for High School and College Writing Teachers*, 2(1), 50–58.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Crosspol by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

# you can't get there from here: cross-sector collaboration and the common core state standards

jason depolo + nancy gardner

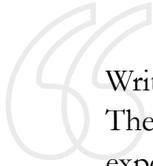


*Teachers, faced with performance-based standardized testing, are challenged to foster the types of learning environments conducive to rhetorically conscious, process-based writing.*

## **You Can't Get There from Here:**

### **Cross-Sector Collaboration and the Common Core State Standards**

Jason DePolo + Nancy S. Gardner



Writing is not simply the enacting of a skill; writing is a social act. The reliance on standardized testing is fueled by economics and expedience as opposed to sound assessment of student learning and writing ability.

#### **The Call**

In November of 2013, the State of North Carolina began an initiative called NC Ready for Success that involved collaboration among UNC, community college, private college/university, and high school faculty with the goal of preparing North Carolina's students to be career and college ready. Alignment teams were formed through an application process, constituting English/Language Arts and Mathematics professionals from the various sectors K-16. We were selected to serve on the English/Language Arts alignment team, which consisted of twelve faculty members, four from each sector (community college, K-12, and UNC). The North Carolina Ready for Success English Language Arts Alignment team studied the writing challenges for North Carolina students at the secondary level, the community college level, and the UNC private college and university level. This group of representatives from each sector was charged with three main goals. We were to learn about teaching writing across sectors, we were to create standards-based resources, and we were to write policy recommendations to support continued collaboration among our sectors.

#### **The Conversation**

We found it advantageous to learn about the teaching of writing in each of our sectors. Although our terminology and specific skills might have differed in complexity, we realized we have many common frustrations, challenges, and goals for our students. We all recognized that teaching writing is hard, that much of the instruction needs to be individualized, that the grading of writing differs from teacher to teacher, and that our students aren't producing quality work. In addition, we all agreed that audience, purpose, organization, and focus are important. We also felt the absolute need for students to take their writing through several rounds of editing/revising in order to continue to hone their skills. Our agreements may seem par for the course, yet they punctuate what writing instructors know and what many legislators and testing services ignore.

After a close examination of the Common Core English Language Arts writing standards for grades 9-10 and 11-12, we concluded they align with the needs and demands of college level writing. These expectations include: write to persuade, write to inform, craft convincing arguments, use reliable evidence, address counter claims, recognize various perspectives, and make and defend claims. These skills seem to transition logically into the expectations and demands of the next level of Higher Education. The question then, in this era of transition to the Common Core, is what impact does standardized testing have on writing instruction in secondary schools and, consequently, on the writing proficiency of students in FYW programs at colleges and universities? As a secondary school ELA teacher and four-year university WPA (Writing Program Administrator), we hope to offer our dual perspectives on this question, resulting from our collaborations as part of a state-wide initiative.

### **Standardized Tests**

From secondary school writing classrooms to university FYW (First Year Writing) programs, teachers work with students who consistently struggle as they attempt to plan, draft, or revise their written compositions. Many of these students' struggles are unfortunate products of an educational system that debilitates their critical engagement with writing by the mandate of standardized tests. Tests that drastically limit the educational opportunities for learning in ELA (English/Language Arts) classrooms. Tests that narrowly assess the multiple dimensions of literacy and circumvent the acquisition of necessary, secondary discourses and literacies students need for college and career readiness. Yet, our students confront more testing than at any point in American educational history, demonstrating results that are skewed by non-instructional factors and superficial thinking (Kohn, 2000). Not only has the argument been made time and time again regarding the inadequacy and even dangers of standardized testing (see Anson, 2008; Brimi, 2012; Kohn, 2000; Perelman, 2008), the evidence continues to mount against it.

The notion that someone can gauge writing proficiency, or even academic literacy for that matter, from multiple choice exams is a fallacy. Writing is not simply the enacting of a skill; writing is a social act. The reliance on standardized testing is fueled by economics and expedience as opposed to sound assessment of student learning and writing ability. Very similar to earlier arguments made in support of remediation, are the overly optimistic views that standardized testing is the singular solution to what many perceive as America's most pressing educational problems; this monocular cure-all is what Mike Rose (1985) referred to as the "myth of transience" (p. 355).

Because of the emphasis on so many high stakes tests that presumably measure student growth and teacher effectiveness, it is apparent that our students are not writing as much throughout their matriculation in our schools. My seniors struggle with writing, and this problem has grown over the last decade. Since my goal

is to make them college and career ready, I know the skills of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) are essential for their success. I also know, however, that there is a lack of focus on writing instruction across the board due to the fact that writing does not appear on any of the standardized tests.

Testing writing through a standardized process is difficult and expensive because it is a performance based assessment requiring a task and a rubric. The very nature of the test often produces formulaic writing, if students are required to do any actual writing at all, and writing processes are never invoked due to the imposed time limits for completion. There lies the rub of expedience; however, at what cost? Standardized writing tests force students into what Anson (2008) calls a “closed discursive system” (p. 116). They are not afforded the opportunity, as with most college and professional writing, to reflect on the diverse writing contexts and rhetorical situations necessary. Though standardized tests may seem the most practical solution to assessing student writing proficiency, they promote what we call the “learning” model of writing. Over a century of writing research has proven that students do not learn to write, just as our children do not learn to talk. Writing ability, like speech, is acquired through a process that is reflexive and requires agency on the part of the student. This process includes imperatives, such as planning, drafting, revising, and reflection, all of which standardized testing disallow. It is logical to conclude then that students need to write in a variety of contexts exploring multiple subjects and purposes over time to provide the necessary input for acquisition to take place. The learning model of standardized testing assesses set skills in a singular, timed situation, which is contrary to the reality of how students gain writing proficiency.

Initially in North Carolina in the 1990’s, there were three writing tests administered in fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. These tests were focused on main ideas, using details and elaboration for support, organization, and coherence. This rigid, formulaic test forced students to write the five paragraph theme, using the generic “My first reason is, my second reason is . . .” as well as rewriting the prompt in the introduction. The conclusion would simply start “In conclusion,” and then repeat the introduction. Oftentimes, the weaker writers scored higher than the more advanced writers who had mastered personal voice and style. This contradiction has played out in a number of studies. For example, Perleman (2008) trained three high school seniors, who had just taken the SAT writing test, to follow the rigid structure of the five paragraph essay, including as many details, even if they were inaccurate, and as many “big” words as possible. Even though the students admitted what they submitted was badly written, “all three students who followed [Perelman’s formula] improved their raw scores on the essay section by at least 2 points out of the 12 possible” (p. 128). Many secondary school teachers of writing understand the importance of moving students beyond the five paragraph essay as well as the need for them to produce meaningful prose. However, the very nature of the test undermines these goals, and due to the value stakeholders place on the scores, what

the test requires becomes the centralized focus of the curriculum (Perleman, 2008, p. 134). This focus erodes quality writing instruction in two ways. First, it forces teachers to comply with narrow views of what constitutes writing in academic and professional contexts, and second, it coerces students to believe, despite what their own writing experiences have been suggesting, that writing is a “one shot deal.” For both teachers and students, the message about writing is a clear one: the emphasis should be placed on the creation of a product, not the development of writing processes (Brimi, 2012, p. 53).

After all of time spent testing to prove a student’s writing ability is ready for college level work, the opposite occurs. What transfers are the ingrained closed system approaches to academic writing. Once students matriculate into FYW programs at colleges and universities, the five-paragraph theme, artificial sense of audience, unclear direction of purpose, and a-contextualized sense of writing are the default. Through my own experiences in FYW classrooms and discussions with writing faculty, lack of rhetorical awareness leads the list of concerns. It is clear that with standardized testing, ‘we can’t get there from here.’ We have concluded that the main CCSS (Common Core State Standards) hold great promise in encouraging teachers and students to engage in a multiple genre approach to writing with the real intention of preparing students to be college and career ready. In addition, the CCSS encourage the habits of mind outlined in the Council for Writing Program Administrators’ *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. Our agreement led us to discuss the CCSS and how they might be introduced in ELA contexts and transfer to Community College and Four-Year Universities even though we are fully aware of the elephant in the room – performance-based standardized testing.

### **The Common Core Writing Standards**

The writers of the Common Core State Standards used evidence from colleges and employers to determine where students fell short after graduating from high school. They wrote the standards to address those gaps between high school and the requirements of college/careers. The ELA standards in reading, writing, speaking/ listening, and language are vertically aligned to ensure a student’s success in college and/or career upon careful matriculation of grades K-12. More specifically, the writing standards address key skills students need to be prepared for college writing. At the high school level, the standards are grouped into 9th-tenth grades, and then 11th-12th grades with the intention students will produce writing that transitions to the college level. Below, I briefly describe the typical scenarios of how the writing components of the CCSS are implemented in my classroom in order to offer insight as to how they “look” in contextualized, open writing environments and how they may be problematized by a-contextualized, test-centered instruction.

## *Text Types and Purposes (CCSS W.11-12.1, W.11-12.2, W.11-12.3)*

### *Argument*

Students write “arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts” (CCSS, 2010, p. 45). In order for students to do this, they introduce clear claims/counterclaims, and then use solid evidence and reasoning in their arguments. The standards ask for formal style and objective tone, polished writing conventions, varied syntax, logical argument, and strong conclusions. In my classes, I use these terms (claims, counterclaims, evidence, tone, purpose, and craft) as we read and explore texts so students begin to recognize these components of writing. I am forever hopeful these ideas will carry over into their own written products. If reading an argumentative essay, we look for the claim and evidence, as well as the tone of the piece. In short writing assignments, I frequently ask students to state a claim or thesis and support it with two specific examples from the text. Previously, this kind of intentional teaching of writing through shorter responses might have been ignored, particularly in classes with more challenged students. I would have assigned more response writing, focused on personal connections to text rather than claims based writing.

### *Informative/Explanatory*

Students write informative/explanatory texts to “examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information” (CCSS, 2010, p. 45). This means they will learn to organize ideas logically and purposely, using strong transitions, appropriate syntax, precise language, polished writing conventions, and strong conclusions. Again, I emphasize the craft and purpose of works we read, so students will understand how a specific word or purposeful organization can affect the tone and overall effect of a work. Making connections between the critical reading process (careful analysis of text including the “how” and the “why”) and the senior’s own writing has become more important in my classroom since implementation of the CCSS. However, if the lower grades have not emphasized as much writing due to “teaching to the test,” then my seniors often have more basic issues—like writing thorough and logical paragraphs or using correct punctuation. My students master the use of textual evidence to support the argumentative writing or the explanatory essay, but then often struggle with weaving their own voices into the piece.

### *Narrative*

Although the standards also include narrative text at the 11-12th grade level, this type of writing is not emphasized as much at the secondary level. Students enter high school having done more narrative writing, so high school teachers tend to focus more on the argumentative and informational/explanatory. The standards for narrative writing encourage students to “engage and orient the reader” through a

variety of appropriate narrative techniques (CCSS, 2010, p. 46). Narrative is emphasized through journal writing for their Senior Project digital portfolios.

*Production and Distribution of Writing (CCSS W.11-12.4, W.11-12.5, W.11-12.6)*

The standards clearly support the writing process in an attempt to help students improve clarity and coherence. Writing should involve “planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach” (CCSS, 2010, p. 46). Using technology and the internet, students are able to collaborate and interact with others to produce and publish writing. High school students tend to plan minimally, write then publish. I also think teachers are guilty of enabling this short cut approach. For years, I would take rough drafts of papers home on the weekends, mark the papers, and return them to students. Their idea of “editing and revising” was simply fixing what I had marked, so they never really learned to edit and/or revise. In many ELA as well as postsecondary contexts, writing is conceived of as being a linear process that students need only step through toward the imitation of an exemplar model. Writing cannot be product oriented. It does not matter if a student has an exemplar model if there is no insight into how it “arrives.” Linear models of writing production find their roots in classical rhetoric’s stages of invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory. However, these stages apply to oral communication, not written. Writing is a recursive process and “what is impossible in speech is *revision* . . .” (Sommers, 1980, p. 379). The CCSS encourage writing as a process, but of course, that takes time often lacking in a high stakes, test-driven environment.

*Research to Build and Present Knowledge (CCSS W.11-12.7, W.11-12.8, W.11-12.9)*

Students should be conducting both short and more extensive research projects to help answer questions or solve problems. The final written product should include reliable, relevant sources and text-based evidence from literary or informational texts in order to demonstrate student comprehension. The standards stress the importance of information literacy, including evaluation of sources and appropriate citations. My seniors have completed multiple, smaller research-based projects throughout their high school careers, but often these projects don’t include a formal piece of writing. The expedience of this type of writing is a product of the need to pay more attention to inevitability of testing. Our seniors complete research projects (primarily learning process steps) in the 9th-tenth grades, and then they write short research papers during their junior year. In order to fully prepare our students for the demands of college and/or career writing, it is important to have them develop sustained, process intensive writing assignments. Our school requires a full research paper during the senior year as a graduation requirement for their Senior Project, but this is a local requirement rather than a statewide prerequisite. The requirements of our senior capstone actually align perfectly with many of the reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language standards of the CCSS. However, if longitudinal acquisition of writing processes and abilities is to be achieved, writing

requirements must be vertically consistent throughout a student's secondary school matriculation.

Ideally, if writing has been given the true emphasis inherent in the spirit of the K-tenth grade standards, the seniors in my classroom have had solid preparation to complete the writing demands of the 11th-12th grade. Unfortunately, due to the emphasis on standardized testing, it is unclear if this will ever happen.

The foundation for college and career readiness requires students to “learn to use writing as a way of offering and supporting opinions, demonstrating understanding of the subjects they are studying, and conveying real and imaginative experiences and events” (CCSS, 2010, p. 18). However, the work toward these goals is messy, not a predictable set of stages. The CCSS present process-based goals, which align with postsecondary writing contexts' emphasis on writing as a process of acquisition and social action as opposed to writing as a learned, mechanical skill. However, it seems that many still adhere to the model that students should “learn writing as they learned to tie their shoe-laces or to drive a car” (Ong, 1986, p. 23). Teachers, faced with performance-based standardized testing, are challenged to foster the types of learning environments conducive to rhetorically conscious, process-based writing. Nancy Atwell (1998), in her text *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*, confesses:

I started out as a creationist. The first days of every school year I created, and for the next thirty-six weeks I maintained the creation: my curriculum . . . I just wanted to be a great teacher – systematic, purposeful, in control . . . I didn't learn in my classroom. I tended to my creation. (p. 3)

Atwell reveals her transformation into an evolutionist, one who allows the classroom context to organically grow and respond to her students' needs. Standardized testing works against these goals and creates dissonance between classroom practice and measurable outcomes. Legislators and testing services would much rather conceive of writing as a clear-cut, objective, and answerable skill set, when it is clear, as over a hundred years of Composition research has demonstrated, writing is open-ended, subjective, and unanswerable.

## **Conclusion**

The State ELA Alignment Team concluded its conversations by developing policy recommendations addressed to the Chief Academic Officers of the University of North Carolina, North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities, North Carolina Community Colleges, and North Carolina Public Schools to support ongoing alignment efforts and conversations. In summary, our recommendations included the following:

1. Access Technology
2. Support authentic assessments of student work
3. Provide writing centers in high school and community college sectors

4. Establish and sustain an statewide online writing support network
5. Ensure that teacher education programs include content area writing for all pre-service teachers
6. Sustain collaboration

These recommendations represent an infrastructure needed to enhance articulation of writing standards vertically across sectors. ELA educators are in constant battle with curricular constriction and teacher autonomy, while, it seems, educators in Higher Education are working toward less autonomy and more curricular commonality. The effort in both sectors should be toward a commonality with autonomy. Due to traditional measures, such as standardized testing, there is a vast disconnect between the Common Core State Standards and assessment in ELA contexts. Expedience-driven, cost reducing, measures lead to a misconstrued sense of what constitutes effective writing instruction, to an unrealistic assessment of CCSS's goals, and to student writers who are unprepared for postsecondary work. It is evident that there needs to be a shift away from solely quantitative assessments toward qualitative-based measures that realize what the Common Core State Standards' goals intend.



## References

- Anson, C. M. (2008). Closed systems and standardized writing tests. *College Composition and Communication*, 60(1), 113-28.
- Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading, and learning*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Brimi, H. (2012). Teaching writing in the shadow of standardized writing assessment: An exploratory study. *American Secondary Education*, 41(1), 52-77.
- Common core state standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. (2010). Common Core State Standards Initiative.
- Kohn, A. (2000, Sept. 27). Standardized testing and its victims. *Education Week*. Retrieved from Education Weekfile:///Macintosh%20HD/Desktop%20Folder/ew\_printstory.cfm
- Ong, W.J. (1986). Writing is a technology that restructures thought. In G. Baumann (Ed.), *The written word: Literacy in transition* (pp. 23-50). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Perelman, L. (2008). Information illiteracy and mass market writing assessments. *College Composition and Communication*, 60(1), 128-41.
- Rose, M. (1985). The language of exclusion: Writing instruction at the university. *College English*, 47(4), 341-59.
- Sommers, N. (1980). Revision strategies of student writers and experienced adult writers. *College Composition and Communication*, 31(4), 378-88.