

How to Implement Common Core's Literacy Standards  
To Enhance Civic Literacy in Arkansas<sup>1</sup>

Sandra Stotsky  
University of Arkansas

Paper presented at the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators  
Little Rock, Arkansas  
August 2, 2011

There are many possible causes of the low state of civic literacy in the U.S. Among them are: what is taught in college-level history or political science courses to undergraduates; what is taught in professional development for K-12 teachers; where the Founding period is apt to be taught in K-12; and what those licensed to teach history may know about American political principles and institutions. Regardless of cause, it is undeniable that students graduate from our public schools without the knowledge and skills they ought to have in order to be informed, responsible, and participating citizens at any level of government.

Common Core's reading standards, just released in June 2010, were not intended as a solution for the dysfunctional or missing civics curricula in our schools, colleges, or teacher preparation and professional development programs. They will, however, influence what English teachers assign in the coming years. It therefore behooves educators in every school district in the country to try to use whatever content is in Common Core's high school standards to guide development of a coherent reading curriculum through the secondary grades ensuring that our students by the end of grade 12 are adequately informed about the rights and responsibilities of American citizens and the institutions, principles, and procedures in this country's unique forms of self-government.

The purpose of my talk is to show how several of Common Core's literacy standards for English Language Arts and History, just adopted by the vast majority of states including Arkansas, can serve as clear guides to the development of a civically rich curriculum by means of an approach known to all of you as backmapping. I will also explain why the most productive implementation of these new civically-rich standards in Arkansas would involve Political Science Departments in the state's college and universities in teacher preparation and professional development programs and how this organization, the AAEA, can facilitate that involvement.

For this talk I draw on whatever relevant research I could locate and my experience as the administrator at the Massachusetts Department of Education in 1999-2003 in charge of revising the state's standards for K-12 in all major subjects among other responsibilities, and as the director of a We the People summer institute for history and government teachers for eight years, co-sponsored by the Lincoln and Therese Filene Foundation and the Center for Civic Education in California.

### **The State of Civic Literacy in the Schools**

It is not hard to document the sorry state of civic literacy in our public schools. Age, grade level, and source of information do not matter. The results and trends are consistent. For example, on the 2006 civics test given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), grade 12 scores (and grade 8 scores) were stagnant from 1998 to 2006 (NAEP, 2007). What did that mean

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper incorporates material from the paper I gave at the March 2011 Annual Meeting of the Arkansas Political Science Association and Chapter Eight in my forthcoming book tentatively titled "Toward 21<sup>st</sup> Century Secondary Literature Programs," to be published by Rowman Littlefield.

with respect to basic civic literacy? For example, just 43 percent of the grade 12 test-takers could describe the meaning of federalism in American government, or the sharing of power between the federal and state governments. This percentage alone suggests that the K-12 curriculum does not have a strong impact on pre-college students' understanding of our basic political institutions and principles.

The 2010 civics results released by NAEP in April 2011 were more depressing (NAEP 2011). Although the average score in 2010 for twelfth graders was not significantly different from their average score in 1998, the NAEP survey of what students are studying revealed serious and growing deficiencies in the high school curriculum. The percentage of students who said they studied the president and cabinet during the school year fell significantly from 63 percent in 1998 to 59 percent in 2010, and the percentage of students who said they studied the U.S. Constitution during the school year fell significantly from 72 percent in 2006 to 67 percent in 2010.

It is not clear why a smaller percentage of our students are studying these topics as seniors. The score on the following open-ended question alone suggests that the majority of grade 12 students have a limited or poor understanding of this country. Students were asked first to read a quotation from Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot*, and then to define the meaning of the term and comment on whether "melting pot" is appropriate to describe the United States. Only 35 percent of students received a "complete" rating on the two-part question.

Long-term voting trends in national elections for young adults suggest that a low level of civic literacy goes hand in glove with a low level of civic participation. Voter turnout among young American citizens (18 to 24) in the 2010 midterm election was 21.3%, declining almost steadily from 25.4% in 1974, according to estimates from the recently released 2010 U.S. Census Current Population Survey, November Supplement (Circle 2011).

### **Curriculum Placement Problems**

The history of the Founding or the Constitutional Period appears to be disappearing from many undergraduate and graduate history curricula or professional development workshops for history teachers, the major exceptions generally being those workshops funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Center for Civic Education, and Traditional American History grants (Stotsky, 2004). Nevertheless, even if current history teachers have not studied the Founding Period in adequate depth in their own undergraduate education, its historical and philosophical background is often taught at grade levels where, a cynic might observe, in-depth understanding is not possible for most students and not necessary for the teacher. It may also be taught in ways that are unlikely to lead to an in-depth understanding. How it is taught in Arkansas schools is unknown, but where bits and pieces of it are placed is clear.

In the 2006 version of Arkansas' social studies curriculum framework for K-8, it seems that students may study different aspects of American history, government, and citizenship, along with topics in economics, environmental studies, and geography, at every single grade level. No one grade is set aside for a chronological course in U.S. history covering many centuries. Bits and pieces of the period leading to the Founding and the Constitutional Period itself (roughly from the American Revolution to about 1800), the philosophical antecedents to the Constitution, and its distinctive features appear at different grade levels. This fragmented approach to the study of U.S. history (which is quite common across states) is a result of using a framework titled "social studies," which is organized by four broad strands (geography, civics, history, and economics) that are further divided into nine broad sub-strands. From these strands and sub-strands, specific content standards are generated for study at each grade level. In Arkansas, many

standards about the Constitutional Period appear in grade 6, a grade level at which the history and meaning of our basic political principles may not be readily grasped.

Traditionally, many students have studied U.S. history and the Founding Period in grade 8, and many still do. The grade 8 placement is due in part to the theory behind the “spiral curriculum,” a way of designing a K-12 curriculum that, when applied to the study of U.S. history, made some sense at the time it was proposed decades ago. Educators believed that it made little sense to teach U.S. history from 1492 to the present in each of grades 5, 8, and 11, the three years that might be devoted to national history, chiefly because students never got very far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century at any grade level. So, proponents of the spiral curriculum suggested that grade 5 go from 1492 to the War of 1812, grade 8 from the Founding Period to Reconstruction after a review of the Revolutionary War, and grade 11 from Reconstruction to the present after a review of the Founding Period. The problem is that grade 8 by default may be where the most intensive study of the Founding in a historical context takes place unless the high school provides a U.S. history survey course in grade 11 that begins around 1620. Needless to say, if the grade at which students study the Founding Period is grade 8, it is unlikely that they will learn much if anything about the Enlightenment, John Locke, or Montesquieu, and read the *Federalist Papers*.

However, the Founding Period may be taught in U.S. government courses. Over half of the states now require such a course. So do many school districts in states that don’t require it. It is usually a one-semester course in grade 12, although it may be taught as a civics course in grade 9. In 2004, the most popular textbook for the U.S. Government course, I was told, was Richard Remy’s *United States Government: Democracy in Action*, published by Glencoe McGraw-Hill, far exceeding the old best seller, Magruder’s *American Government*. It includes chapters on the Founding Period, the Constitutional Convention, the English legal tradition, the Enlightenment era, and American colonial era antecedents to the Founding.

In Arkansas, it is not clear where the Constitutional Period receives its most in-depth treatment. The state requires a one-semester Civics for Core Curriculum course that can be taught in grades 9 to 12, but this course does not provide the historical context for the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The state also requires a year of American history, with standards that fully address the Constitutional Period. However, these standards go from the exploration of the New World and the earliest settlements of North America to the present, thus leaving little time in just a year-long course for reading and discussing basic political principles and documents.

Also required is a one-semester course on American government; it can also be taught in grades 9 to 12. If taught in grade 12 with a good textbook, it can provide students with an adequate knowledge of our basic political principles and documents. However, as Mark Molli at the Center for Civic Education indicated in a personal communication (Molli, 2011), without an assessment linked to a graduation requirement for a U.S. government or civics course, we don’t know to what extent its material is taught.

### **Common Core’s Reading Standards**

In 2010, a movement to develop national standards in basic subjects came to fruition, as we all know. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers jointly developed in a project titled Common Core State Standards Initiative a set of K-12 standards in mathematics and a set in the English language arts and reading. Enticed by the criteria in the USDE’s Race to the Top competitive grants and encouraged by a variety of organizations heavily funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, about 46 states including Arkansas have adopted Common Core’s standards.

It is important to remember that the precise title of Common Core's English language arts standards is Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. Common Core's document does not make it clear how English teachers can be held accountable for the teaching of literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects on national reading tests based on these standards. The same question might be asked with respect to NAEP's grade 11/12 reading test, which also requires 70% of the reading test items to focus on informational reading, except for the fact that NAEP's tests cannot be used for accountability purposes. Moreover, NAEP's tests are given not to all grade 12 students in every school in a state but only to a representative sample. Nevertheless, while what will be on the common reading tests with respect to history and science is not yet clear, Common Core does expect teachers across the curriculum to teach students how to read and understand the textbooks and other reading materials they assign in their courses. The standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects for Grades 6–12 appear on pp.59-64.

What has the potential to affect the state of civic literacy in this country is the content of two of Common Core's Reading Standards for Informational Text. So far as it looks, English teachers are to be held accountable for the following Informational standards in grades 9-12:

"For grades 9-10: Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), including how they address related themes and concepts."

"For grades 11-12: Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features."

English teachers are also to be held accountable for the following Literature standard:

"For grades 11-12: Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics."

As can be seen, the first two standards above expect students to understand the "purposes, rhetorical features, related themes, and concepts" in our seminal political documents. The third standard above expects students to understand foundational works of American literature in the past three centuries relating to these themes and topics. It is clear that the focus of these particular standards is on the content of what is in these seminal texts, not on students' personal responses to their content or on the iterative processes of writing and revising common to English classes in recent decades.

It is obvious that if high school students are to read, analyze, and understand the Founding documents specified above in grades 11 and 12, they need to be familiar with the literary and historical context for these documents, as well as their philosophical antecedents. Some of this contextual and antecedent information can be studied simultaneously with the reading of these documents. But teachers will need to assign students grade-appropriate literary and informational texts in earlier grades, grades 6-10, so that students can draw on some familiar information when they first read these basic political documents in grade 11 or 12. Teachers will also have to build

their capacity to read texts written at a time when educated citizens writing for the public used large vocabularies and wrote long and complex sentences.

### **How these intellectual goals can guide curriculum developers**

What more precisely would classroom teachers and curriculum developers need to consider in order to identify particular texts students should be assigned in grades 6-10 in preparation for reading one particular seminal text? Let's start with an example that most people would agree all students should read before they graduate from an American high school--*The Federalist*. (In fact, *The Federalist* is the only specific title required for study in K-12 by Massachusetts law.)

To understand, for example, Federalist #10, one of the most important writings in the debate to promote ratification of the Constitution, students must sustain full mental concentration over many dense (but not long) paragraphs. James Madison (Publius) coherently argues that liberty and faction (a special interest group) are essential in any healthy government system and that the best way to prevent the concentration of power in one or more special interest groups in a republican form of government is to encourage as many factions as possible so that no one faction can predominate. What Madison expected of his readers then was some common historical knowledge and some analogous experiences in local government. Readers today, especially young readers, need more. They clearly need a grasp of the vocabulary Madison used and some familiarity with the style he used to express his ideas. His long and complex sentences often contain qualifications of the ideas or generalizations he presents.

Probably the most difficult aspect of this Federalist Paper and the others for high school students is that Madison's writing is wholly at an abstract level of thinking. That is, he offers no names, places, events, and times as examples to ground the generalizations he expresses in almost every sentence. There is no doubt that high school students today need some familiarity with the historical knowledge that Madison could expect his educated contemporaries to have. This knowledge includes an understanding of government in the ancient world and in several Italian city-states during the Renaissance, as well as ideas about self-government by Anglo-Scottish and French philosophers.

So, what are some possible texts that might be assigned in earlier grades in the English class, say from 6 to 10 or 11, to prepare students for reading Federalist #10 in grade 11 or 12 with understanding? What I am about to demonstrate is a curriculum development strategy called backmapping. In backmapping, one starts with a goal or objective and works backwards, showing how one can get to that goal, grade by grade. In other words, one has to know where one is going first before plotting the journey to get there.

### **What informational texts might be assigned in grades 6 to 10 or 11?**

English or reading teachers could assign informational texts that address the Constitutional Convention, key figures attending it, the debate about the Constitution's innovative and/or controversial features, and the historical and philosophical background to the argument in Federalist #10. Each grade's readings should help students to accumulate gradually a body of information they can draw on when they first read Federalist #10. For example:

#### **For grades 6 and 7**

Jean Fritz's *Alexander Hamilton: The Outsider* (judged to be readable in grades 4-6).  
Barbara Mitchell's *Father of the Constitution: A Story About James Madison* (reading level 5.8)

Letters between John and Abigail Adams

**For grades 7, 8, and 9**

Catherine Drinker Bowen's *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention May-September 1787* (judged to be readable in grades 7-9).  
Jean Fritz's *Shh! We're Writing the Constitution* (reading level 7.1)

**For grades 9 and 10**

*The Declaration of Independence*  
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*

**For grades 11 and 12**

Marc M. Arkin's "'The Intractable Principle': David Hume, James Madison, Religion, and the Tenth Federalist." *American Journal of Legal History* 39, 1995.  
Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (written in 1748)  
James Madison's *Notes on the Constitutional Convention*  
Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (reading level 11.8)  
John Kaminski's *James Madison: Champion of Liberty and Justice*  
Garry Wills' *Explaining America: The Federalist*

**What imaginative literary texts might be assigned in grades 6 to 10 or 11?**

English or reading teachers also need to assign some foundational works of American literature written in the 18th or 19th century that illustrate the style, language, and vocabulary of written texts of this time. The content of literary readings assigned in grades before grade 11 or 12 does not have to relate to the content of Federalist #10. They may well illustrate related themes, topics, or concepts that are embedded in our founding political documents and these readings could be analyzed for these themes, topics, or concept, but this substantive link is not necessary. Given the intellectual goals of CCRS, the chief purpose for assigning some foundational literary readings at each grade level is to help today's students to develop skill in understanding the vocabulary, sentence structures, and stylistic demands of earlier centuries of American writing.

Keep in mind that other imaginative and information texts should be assigned at each grade level and can reflect other cultures, periods of time, and literary movements. The following are simply some examples of texts teachers can assign in the middle and lower high school grades to prepare students for addressing an upper high school standard on foundational works in our political history--one major intellectual goal of the high school curriculum. The texts I list below, for grades 6-10, also prepare students for addressing the upper high school standard on foundational works in American literature, another intellectual goal of the high school curriculum. They are all, as can be seen, well-known works in American literature, but the teacher's goal is not just to familiarize students with them or their authors but to use them to develop the skills needed for reading the basic political documents that inform their understanding of American principles, procedures, and institutions.

**For grades 6 and 7**

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*  
Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, Rip Van Winkle*

**For grades 7, 8, and 9**

Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra, The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*  
James Fenimore Cooper's, *Leatherstocking Tales*, especially *Last of the Mohicans*  
Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave, Written by Himself*  
Edgar Allan Poe's, "The Gold-Bug," "The Pit and the Pendulum," and other short stories

**For grades 9 and 10**

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Bartleby the Scrivener*  
Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*  
William Cullen Bryant's poems

**For grades 11 and 12**

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*  
Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*  
Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

**Concluding Remarks**

While Common Core's grade-level reading standards do not suggest ways to link works in order to build substantive civic and literary knowledge over the course of one grade or over several grades (i.e., they do not indicate basic organizing principles for coherent curriculum sequences), several standards at the upper high school level do provide substantive goals for the K-12 curriculum that most parents and other citizens would agree on. Moreover, an appendix to the main document lists titles of literary and non-literary works grouped by genre that illustrate a desirable range of reading difficulty in the upper high school grades (and at every grade level from K-12). As Common Core makes clear, they are exemplars of grade-level difficulty, not required readings for each grade. The purpose of this appendix is to underline the point that students should be reading successively more complex or difficult texts through the grades.

Fortunately, several standards that high school English teachers must address are intellectually rich enough to serve as guides for selecting imaginative and informational texts in earlier grades that can develop the reading skills needed for authentic college-level coursework. English teachers and curriculum specialists simply need to work backward (or backmap) from these content-specific standards in grades 11 and 12 to ensure that students in grades 6 to 10 are reading texts that will help them reach this goal. This is one major way in which they will be able to create coherent curriculum sequences. Please note that backmapping can be done with just that one standard on foundational works of American literature.

I am sorry to say that I have seen no evidence yet of backmapping in Arkansas schools. I've visited several elementary schools this past spring and saw teachers eagerly figuring out grade level difficulty for the selections they might incorporate into their reading curriculum. At no point did any one suggest that they needed to think first about what might be read, say, in grade 6, informational or literary, and then work backwards to see how to stage the development of reading skills from grade to grade in the context of specific works or texts that would lead to the anchor choices in grade 6.

**Implications of Common Core's Reading Standards for Arkansas' high school history/U.S. government curriculum**

1. Require the currently required U.S. government course to be given in the fall semester of grade 12 and to address Western political philosophy and the Founding in-depth. No student should graduate from an American high school without an upper high school level understanding of such basic political principles as limited government, consent of the people, balance of powers, checks and balances, and an independent judiciary. It would be desirable for high schools to standardize their course offerings so that all students take a U.S. government course in the fall of grade 12 and arrange for their teachers to collaborate with English teachers when the required documents are being taught. Since a one-semester U.S. government course is required in

Arkansas, only its timing is at issue. It would be helpful if the textbook these U.S. government teachers use facilitated study of these required documents.

**2. Allow for and encourage *two consecutive years of U.S. history in high school.*** The possibility of two consecutive years of U.S. history, whether in grades 9-10 or 10-11, was built into the 2003 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework, and many U.S. history teachers in Massachusetts told department of education staff that this was the best gift they could ever have been given, whether or not they liked the new standards. A two-year U.S. history course at the high school level would enable history teachers to spend sufficient time on the Constitutional Period. They would have a clear incentive to do so if the state required a civics or U.S. history test for graduation that emphasized the Constitutional Period.

### **Implications of Common Core's Reading Standards for Professional Development and Teacher Licensure**

It is reasonable to assume that all teachers should know something about the historical and cultural context of the topics or texts they teach. If English teachers are to teach high school students how to read and understand our seminal political documents, they ought to understand their historical context and their philosophical background. Since they probably majored in English, it is unlikely that they were required to study the context and background for these documents, as one would expect history and U.S. government majors to have done. This means that the nation's high school English teachers probably need considerable professional development in the context and background of the political documents their high school English departments are required to teach their students how to read, as well as those they also choose to teach. Who is better equipped to provide this professional development than departments of political science and political philosophy?

It is also reasonable to assume that most preparation programs for English teachers do not require prior coursework in political science and U.S. history. Thus, departments of political science and political philosophy might well begin inquiries about what coursework should be required of aspiring English teachers or taken to satisfy core distribution requirements. It may well be that prospective English teachers should be required to take coursework on the Constitutional Period from both U.S. history and political science faculty. Or perhaps prospective English teachers, in order to address Common Core's standards, should be taking interdisciplinary coursework involving collaborating faculty in the English, U.S. history, political science, and philosophy departments.

**1. Require all U.S. government, history, and English teachers to participate once every five years in a five-day We the People summer institute.** These institutes are offered in almost every state every year by the Center for Civic Education in Calabasas, California. They are among the most academically rigorous workshops available for K-12 teachers and should be approved for professional development credits as part of the required credits teachers must accumulate for license renewal.

**2. Require accreditation of teacher preparation programs in U.S. history or U.S. government in state's institutions of higher education by professional associations dedicated to the discipline of history or political science, not by the National Council for the Social Studies.** If accreditation or program approval is carried out by NCATE for the Arkansas Department of Education and Board of Education, the Board of Education can ask discipline-based organizations to provide peer reviewers for these programs.

**3. Require demanding licensure tests in U.S. and world history and in U.S. government that stress the history of Western political thought and the Enlightenment.** A good high school student could easily pass most existing teacher tests in history or social studies. At present, the major companies that construct teacher tests use professional peers—teachers and faculty in higher education (including schools of education)—for reviewing test items and determining cut scores. However, test items and passing scores for teacher tests are more likely to reflect fear that demanding tests will produce high failure rates (with political and economic consequences for the state’s teacher preparation programs) than to reflect appropriate academic standards.

### References

Center for the Constitution. 2010. “2010 Virginia Civic Health Index.” Center for the Constitution. [http://center.montpelier.org/2010\\_virginia\\_civic\\_health\\_index](http://center.montpelier.org/2010_virginia_civic_health_index).

Circle Staff. 2011. “The Youth Vote in 2010: Final Estimates Based on Census Data.” *Circle Fact Sheet*. Tufts University: Jonathan Tisch College for Citizenship and Public Service, p. 1.

Common Core State Standards Initiative. 2010. <http://corestandards.org/the-standards>.

ISI. 2011. “How Civics Knowledge Trumps a College Degree in Promoting Active Civic Engagement.” Available at <http://www.americancivilliteracy.org/>.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtel/results.html>.

Molli, Mark. Personal communication, May 17, 2011. “Our research over the past three years indicates that 45 states require students to take a high school civics course. But questions exist about whether these requirements are enforced since many of these states do not require assessment linked to that graduation requirement.”

NAEP. 2007. *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2006*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2006/2007476.asp>.

NAEP. 2011. *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011466>.

Stotsky, Sandra. 2004. "What Happens When History Teachers No Longer Understand the Founding?" *Academic Questions*, Summer, 21-51.