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YOUR PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS AND LITERACY

Understanding the Role of Informational Text in CCGPS

When Georgia adopted the Common Core Performance Standards for English Language Arts two years ago, three major shifts in focus emerged that represented an appreciation of the demands of the 21st century workplace and post-secondary environments. These three shifts were 1) a move to more complex text choices, 2) the inclusion of more content-rich non-fiction, and 3) an emphasis on producing relevant and meaningful text-based evidence for claims made in argument and exposition.

The rationale for each of these shifts is compelling. The move to use more complex texts seeks to remedy the measureable decreases in students' ability to negotiate lengthy, abstract, or higher Lexile literature over the past couple of decades. In a well-meaning effort to encourage reading and engage students of every skill level, the overall metric of complexity of our literature text books, novel choices, and other instructional materials saw a steady decline for many years (J.S. Chall, S. Conrad, and S. Harris, "Bending the Learning Curve Trajectory" 1996). The result has been that students are graduating from high school unable to independently comprehend neither college-level reading material nor the technical texts necessary to an entry level military or career position (G. Williamson, *Meta-metrics*, 2006; ACT, 2009).

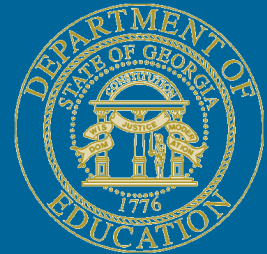
Shift number three recognizes the challenges placed on students in the modern world as more and more news, advertising, art, opinion, and general information are delivered to them in short, decontextualized sound bytes. Their attention spans, reading stamina, and general ability to discern good, well-founded information from hyperbole, opinion, or outright misinformation is seriously hindered. The renewed focus on evidence, the quality of sources, the soundness of logic, and the ability to produce analysis from textual evidence produces students who are able to negotiate the cognitive demands of our constantly changing and information-charged world.

But of all three of the shifts, perhaps none has led to more discussion among educators than shift two: the inclusion of more informational text in the curriculum. As the new standards were introduced, our attempts to unpack and make meaning from some of the new directives inevitably resulted in varying interpretations among educators. For many, the "50% informational text in the ELA classroom" comment that cropped up in training materials caused some anxiety that the deep study of the world's great novels, poems, and plays would be made to take a back seat to the study of computer manuals and newspapers.



Over the course of the first year of CCGPS implementation this misperception has largely been laid to rest as we have discovered the strengths and positive results of the shift. We have witnessed the excitement and renewed enthusiasm of the students for poems and novels as they are placed in cultural and historical context through pairings with informational text. Not only are students building background knowledge, experiencing technical and academic vocabulary with greater regularity, and building cognitive muscle through sustained engagement with complex texts, they are also gaining the (continued page 2)

Georgia
Department of
Education



Dr. John D. Barge,
State School
Superintendent

*"Making Education
Work for All Georgians"*

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substantial added benefit of placing the great works of literature within a larger context that allows them to apply meaningful analysis to a literary work.

Consider this example. For many years Gary Paulsen's great young adult novel *Hatchet* has been taught in middle schools. Students enjoy the book and the journey of its young protagonist Brian as he struggles to survive an Alaskan winter in the wilderness after the small plane ferrying him to visit his father crashes. The addition of a map of Alaska and an almanac could provide an interesting study of the author's craft and purpose. Why was Brian lost just *here*? What geographic elements helped Paulsen write an interesting story (the extreme cold presented challenges to the protagonist; the remoteness of the location created plausible isolation while still making rescue a remote possibility; the flora and fauna, realistically depicted, are just right to enable Brian's survival). Students might enjoy reading excerpts of Paulsen's autobiography *Guts*, which enlightens readers about how Paulsen came to have so much knowledge of the wilderness, why the subject appealed to him, and how much of Brian's experience was drawn from Paulsen's own. Students could examine wilderness survival guides and make informed arguments about the advisability of Brian's tactics. They could learn to start a fire, make a salad from wild greens, use a compass or GPS correctly, or even how to apply CPR when your pilot is having a heart attack. We should also include professional literary criticism. When students are able to examine real-world informational texts to help bring a novel to life, they tend not only to retain the information much longer, but they can also offer much deeper and more meaningful commentary and analysis on the literary aspects of the text (National Education Goals Panel, 1991; National Research Council, 1993).

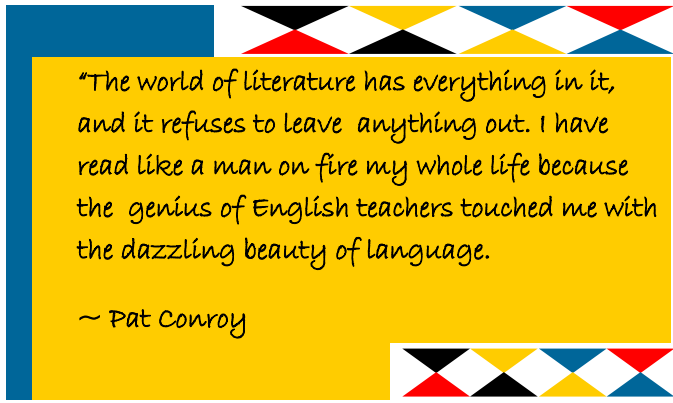
The foregoing example deals with a unit that has a literary work as its focus, and the ways in which a comparable amount of informational text can be supplemented along with the close reading of the literary work to enhance engagement, retention, and understanding. But teachers are also being invited to feature non-fiction texts as their *primary* focus in a couple of their units of instruction throughout the year. The idea of studying a technical manual on radar repair or the geographic features of Sub-Saharan Africa for 6 or 8 weeks is enough to raise the hackles of any classics-loving teacher of English literature. But, of course, when we talk about focusing on a non-fiction text in ELA,

what we are in fact talking about is something a great deal more beautiful and nuanced than some technical manual. In many cases we simply have not thought carefully about which texts we might consider.

Who would not relish the opportunity to several weeks reading, discussing, and analyzing Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Ellison's *Shadow and Act*, Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Foote's *Civil War Narratives*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with Alex Haley, the essays of Orwell, Twain, and London, or Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie* to name but a very few. Additionally, we can address our responsibility to make our students strong critical thinkers, eloquent debaters, and well-informed consumers by occasionally focusing on a topical work of literary merit such as Carson's *Silent Spring*.

Just as a unit with an extended focus on a literary text should be paired with informational texts that enhance understanding, so should a unit that features non-fiction be paired with literary works. Students conducting a close reading of Shelby Foote's *Civil War Narratives* will develop a much richer understanding of the human experience of war by pausing to include a Walt Whitman poem, or excerpts from Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*.

Often times when we are asked why we are teaching a unit on a particular novel or non-fiction piece, our most compelling reason is that we have taught the piece for many, many years and have the lessons and materials down pat. A deep familiarity with a text is an enormous advantage for educators and often for their students, but it is also exciting to have new material to explore. The CCGPS suggestion to include more non-fiction than we perhaps have in the past may be the doorway to some fascinating and unexplored worlds of learning.



"The world of literature has everything in it, and it refuses to leave anything out. I have read like a man on fire my whole life because the genius of English teachers touched me with the dazzling beauty of language.

~ Pat Conroy

Instructional Resource Update

The Georgia DOE ELA team is presently putting together a cohort of dedicated and highly-recommended Georgia educators to review and revise current ELA units as a part of continuing efforts to provide updated CCGPS implementation resources. Selected teachers are scheduled to

- ◆ Participate in training on the Tri-State Rubric which will be used to evaluate current and final units
- ◆ Edit existing units and tasks to identify gaps using a common template
- ◆ Create additional tasks, assessment, etc. to address gaps
- ◆ Enhance alignment and continuity throughout units

The unit revisions will not impact instructional materials that may already have been purchased.

Four teachers per grade level are being chosen to assist the GaDOE ELA team in completion of this revision. Work is expected to conclude in mid-June. We are looking forward to posting and sharing the results of this project by the end of June.

In addition to revision of the existing units, we will be soliciting the original work of Georgia educators in order to compile a catalogue of individual tasks and lessons that can be accessed “a la carte” by your peers around the state. In the coming weeks we will be providing you with access to a



website where interested contributors can submit their work. The creators of tasks and lessons that are chosen for publication on GeorgiaStandards.Org will be contracted to submit their work in the DOE template provided and will be compensated with an honorarium of \$200 per accepted lesson.

We are proud to be partnering with so many talented educators around the state, and are looking forward to the opportunity to share your work and your expertise. Further details will be sent out to our mailing list soon.

Summer Partnership Institutes

As we have in prior years, the GaDOE ELA team will host a series of networking and professional learning opportunities during the summer. This year’s summer institutes are entitled **“Partners in Progress: Creating a Culture of Literacy in Georgia Schools”** and will feature a series of presentations on collaborative instructional models showcasing ELA teachers who have found creative and effective ways to partner with media specialists, administrators, inclusion teachers of special needs and language learners and other educational professionals. We have scheduled the events around the state:

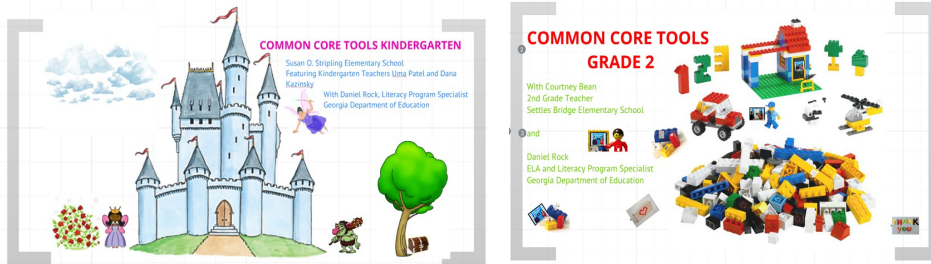
- July 10, Georgia Southern University Campus, Statesboro
- July 12, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw
- July 16, Macon State College, Macon
- July 17, University of Georgia Extension Campus, Tifton



Registration will be limited to 250-300 attendees (depending upon the venue) and will open in May. Further details on registration, agenda, speakers, travel, and more will be published on our website and pushed out to our listserv members May 1.

Please Note: We are currently seeking Georgia educators who are engaging and informed presenters to share their stories of collaboration in the successful implementation of the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards. If you know of a team within your school or district that has partnered in an exemplary way, please fill out a brief application and statement of interest at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/111IKJ5Xj7MXA3jN5ix-szmjohcSbRVjB9h6C9D9YBsAo/viewform?sid=48a2210339e8582b&token=KldrD0BAAA.DY7Aiy_qhexuCGIwbAUgpg.okYu3GNH0bXi0hYimke6cg. Teams are welcome to apply to present at more than one of the geographic locations noted above. Honorariums for services will apply.

New Webcasts Available



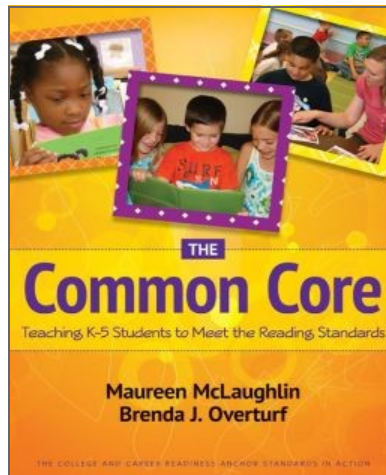
These new webcasts and more are available for viewing now at:
<https://www.georgiastandards.org/Common-Core/Pages/ELA.aspx>

All instructional materials mentioned in the webcasts are available for download next to the embedded video. Let us know what you think!

Resources We Recommend

This essential resource explains the key points of the CCSS reading standards, then aligns each Standard with appropriate research-based strategies, and shows you how to use those strategies to teach your students. Classroom applications and student examples will make this your go to CCSS resource. Research-based, classroom-tested, and peer-reviewed, IRA titles are among the highest quality tools that help literacy professionals do their jobs better.

From International Reading Association
<http://www.reading.org/General/Publications/Books/bk815.aspx>



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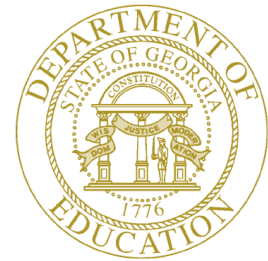
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ELA 6-8	Join-ela-6-8@list.doe.k12.ga.us
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http://public.doe.k12.ga.us/ci_services.aspx?PageReq=CIServEnglish

GeorgiaStandards.Org ELA Page:
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