

ACHIEVING

NEXT

Using the Tests (You Think) You Hate
to Help the Students You Love

GENERATION

LITERACY

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ACHIEVING NEXT GENERATION LITERACY

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Introduction: It's Not About Teaching to the Test

Let's start with a question. Who do you think said the following?

We firmly believe that rates of college and career readiness and postsecondary success will not improve if teachers and students are distracted by the need to speed through impossibly broad course content and spend time on narrowly cast test preparation in an understandable but misguided effort to boost scores at the expense of mastery of critical knowledge, skills, and understandings.

Sounds like a parent or a teacher speaking out against test-prep culture, doesn't it? We thought so, too. Actually, these are the words of the College Board (2014c, p. 14), and they fuel our hope that the redesign of the SAT and the upcoming tests from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) will reflect the belief that test prep should not replace deeper learning.

The quote from the College Board is so good that we need to share the rest of it:

Further, we believe that the rates of college and career readiness and postsecondary success will improve only if our nation's teachers are empowered to help the full range of students practice the kinds of rigorous, engaging daily work through which academic excellence can genuinely and reliably be attained. (College Board, 2014c, p. 12)

That is what this book is about: teaching rich and challenging content in engaging ways that will equip students for postsecondary success while still preparing them to be successful on high-stakes exams—whether the SAT or ACT, achievement tests from PARCC and Smarter Balanced, or independent state assessments.

What Do Our Students Really Need?

We are living in an age in which a test score is assumed to reflect the quality of the instruction a student has received. But if we were to really consider what the indicators of a good education are, we would come up with many different answers representing a range of values and viewpoints. The conversation might go on for hours. Because this is a book focused on literacy, the question can be narrowed a bit: *What are the markers of an effective literacy education? What do our students really need in order to be literate? What are the qualities that a literate individual possesses?*

Here's what we believe literate individuals are able to do:

- 1. Demonstrate independence** with complex text by asking questions and being able to clarify information.
- 2. Build strong content knowledge** through purposeful reading, writing, viewing, listening, and research.
- 3. Respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline** by shifting tone and selecting convincing evidence.
- 4. Comprehend as well as critique** by analyzing the content and bias of sources.
- 5. Value evidence** in arguments they hear, read, or develop.

6. Use technology strategically and capably by integrating sources and using tools to support their intentions.

7. Come to understand other perspectives and cultures through evaluation of their own perspectives and the perspectives of others.

If these qualities look familiar, it's because they are the seven "capacities of the literate individual" (CLI) outlined in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA) & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2015). Although the Common Core State Standards remain controversial for a number of reasons, we hope you will agree that the capacities described are ones that all students should develop. We believe that they are important life skills, critical to the exercise of the rights and responsibilities of global citizens and to the navigation of everyday life. Together, they form a portrait of what we are calling "next generation literacy."

The Common Core State Standards for ELA and content area literacy have been designed to ensure students will be college and career ready in terms of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language skills. Although the stated purpose of these standards is to prepare students to engage in the *processes* that are necessary in the college classroom or in the workforce, ironically, it's not the processes but the *products* of the Common Core (test scores) that tend to preoccupy educators, students, and parents. Throughout this text, the product we focus on is not test scores but students' acquisition and development of the capacities of the literate individual. To frame this in terms of the "backward design" model of lesson planning popularized by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005), the CLI are the desired results, and the various high-stakes tests students must take provide evidence of those desired results.

Of course, we want to focus on the practical, so the next question we need to ask is this: *What can we do in the classroom*

to help students develop the capacities of the literate individual and achieve next generation literacy?

Teaching *Informed* by the Tests

One of the dangers of standards-based assessments is teachers thinking that they need to narrow their rich curricula and gear their instruction toward testing. Perhaps they incorporate fewer, if any, creative activities like role-play and reader's theater; perhaps they devote more time to drills, rote memorization, and practice exams. While these approaches can help students become more comfortable with high-stakes exams, they also send the harmful message that exams are the end-all, be-all of education . . . that test scores are more important than the process of learning. By contrast, in the authentic type of classroom most teachers strive for, the focus is helping students acquire the knowledge and skills that will help them succeed on a much broader scale.

To write this book, we pored over sample test questions from PARCC, Smarter Balanced, the SAT and ACT, and representative state standards-based exams, and then we connected the content of these questions with the CLI. Our hope is that after reading this book, you will teach with these capacities as a primary concern and look to the tests your students will take as a resource for helping them develop the skills and knowledge they need.

Who We Are

Together, we have more than 25 years of teaching experience at the high school level. Both of us made the transition from teaching high school to teaching preservice and inservice secondary education teachers at the undergraduate and graduate levels. We've collaborated several times as writers, always keeping our focus on providing practical advice to our colleagues in the field. Both of the books we have published together (Giouroukakis & Connolly,

2012, 2013) help the reader navigate the most efficient route to creating standards-based lessons that optimize student learning.

Maureen has a passion for service learning, so throughout this book, you will note many lessons that relate to social issues. Vicky is an expert at developing strategies to meet the needs of English language learners (ELLs) and struggling learners. She made sure that all the strategies we recommend throughout the text include clear and simple ways that they can be used to differentiate instruction. Whenever we choose information to include in the lessons we present to preservice and inservice teachers and whenever we write professional materials, we always ask ourselves, “Is this information clear and transferable into most classrooms?” Only when the answer is “yes” do we share it. The contents of this book meet that same standard of practicality.

As teacher educators, we are constantly trying to examine our own practice and reflect on what is working and what needs development. Backward design provides a framework for our planning, and we use the Common Core State Standards in general, and the CLI in particular, to guide our thinking about enduring understandings, skills, knowledge, and transfer. Although the Common Core State Standards have encouraged us to focus more on expository text and argument, we want to stress that novels, poetry, and short stories, along with narrative and creative writing, still hold an essential place in students’ literacy development.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for you! We are writing for middle and high school-level English language arts professionals (teachers, administrators, literacy coaches, staff developers, and teacher educators in the field of ELA) who recognize they need to prepare students for the next generation of exams but want to do so in a way that engages students in content learning and the development of next generation literacy and critical thinking skills.

What This Book Is For

In the pages ahead, we focus on the capacities of the literate individual, illustrate what the next generation of assessments that are designed to measure these CLI look like, and explore the knowledge and skills these tests require. Then we show you how to use the backward design model to create rich and challenging lessons that are aligned with the tests and incorporate the strategies you need to foster student success.

We want to be clear that this is *not* a test-prep book. We have no interest in drill-and-kill practices that narrow learning just to get students to pass an exam. This is a book about engaging, meaningful instructional methods and strategies for developing students' literacy skills and showing students how to transfer those skills to success on assessments. It is a resource for ELA professionals that provides answers to the questions so many of today's teachers have:

- *How can I prepare my students for standardized testing without sacrificing the creativity and passion for learning that are true to my values and to the ideals of the profession?*
- *How can I provide student-centered instructional methods and activities that are standards-based, engaging, motivating, thought-provoking, and meaningful—and that will also translate to high test scores?*

How This Book Is Organized

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, we make overt the ways that test development reflects literacy skills and influences instruction. Chapter 1 addresses the question of what it means to be literate in the 21st century and explores the literacy capacities that we want our students to have by the time they graduate from high school. Then we discuss how backward design can provide a roadmap for developing the CLI students need to

succeed on exams and, more critically, also need to succeed in college, in their careers, and throughout their lives as involved, interested, and interesting human beings.

In Chapter 2, we analyze the next generation of exams and discuss the mindful literacy-focused changes made to the SAT exam as well as the development of the newer standards-based tests from the two national testing consortia, PARCC and Smarter Balanced. We also analyze various state tests. We compare similar components shared by these exams and highlight the unique qualities of each. We make purposeful connections among the components of the exams and specific CLI so that you can consider knowledge and skills that you want your students to develop.

In Part II, covering Chapters 3–8, we explore six of the seven CLI, highlighting each one's component skills and modeling the process of creating lessons that will help students develop mastery. Note that we do not include a chapter for the first capacity—*demonstrate independence with complex text by asking questions and clarifying information*, which encompasses the many ways that we want students to be independent in their reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. It's the development of the other six capacities that makes this kind of independence possible. Each chapter in Part II also presents a sample lesson for one of the capacities, and every lesson has a strong focus on differentiation. The chapters in Part II present dozens of instructional strategies (42 in total), and in the book's Conclusion you will find a master chart that captures all the strategies associated with each capacity (see pp. 135–136).

Neither effective instruction nor this book is about teaching to the tests. Ultimately, the approach we advocate underscores that meaningful learning experiences are about enabling student growth and self-sufficiency. It's our hope you will consult this book for new ideas and practical strategies for fostering your students' development as independent, literate, well-educated individuals who are *also* well prepared to ace their high-stakes tests.