

## Does the “Race to the Top” Include Literature? Why Reading Books Still Matters in a Data-Driven World

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In our journal we routinely review various children’s and young adult books with the goal of introducing teachers, parents, librarians, and young people to the many exciting texts published each year. However, with the continued discourse of school failure and reform, I am increasingly worried about the future of literature teaching in our schools.

Literature teaching is more often being replaced with teaching reading strategies and basic comprehension, often through the use of excerpts from larger texts. The risk is that the narrative experience is being reduced to an exercise as “making connections” or “forming generalizations.” What follows are some key standards concerning the teaching of literature found in the Common Core State Standards document, available at [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org). While these are not meant to be “national” standards in the sense that they must be adopted as is by all states, many states are adopting them as the basis for their state’s standards in order to be eligible to compete for national funding through President Barack Obama’s “Race to the Top” program:

*Grade 1, Key Ideas and Details:*

1. Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
2. Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
3. Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.

*Grade 8, Key Ideas and Details:*

1. Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
3. Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

While these standards may not seem problematic at first glance, what they and other reading standards in the Core Standards document omit is explicit attention to literary appreciation or personal/aesthetic response to texts. Perhaps it is true that these types of “artsy” responses are not necessary for “college and career readiness,” but I argue that they are essential for the development of reflective, empathetic, responsible, and culturally sensitive adults, qualities that will no doubt be important if we intend to flourish in an increasingly globalized, flat world.

So how exactly does literature improve its readers? Through personal response and subsequent critical reflection, individual readers not only apply their life experiences to the reading of texts, but also compare and contrast their experiences with those of the books’ characters to subsequently widen their worldview. Norman Holland writes about this “two way experience” of reading in *Literature and the Brain*:

We project the work *outward* from ourselves when our brains automatically translate sensations within our bodies outward *into* a three-dimensional text independent of our bodies. We also project into that literary work “out there.” We flesh out people, events, and language. We fill in gaps in a story. We infer the inner thoughts of characters or the parts of an environment that we cannot see. . . . (42)

This description makes the act of reading sound very active—not only cognitively, but also emotionally. We interact intellectually and affectively with the events and characters that populate a narrative text.

Recently, scientists have begun to study so-called mirror neurons, which apparently fire when a subject watches a certain event or action, just as motor neurons do. In other words, according to the mirror neuron theory, it is possible to simply watch another person’s actions, or experience a virtual narrative world such as a novel, and respond similarly to experiencing the event in real life. However, when experiencing a text-based narrative, while the brain may feel an impulse to act as it would in response to a real life event, the brain inhibits this physical action, knowing on some level that the affective experience is simply vicarious. So the emotional response to literature is real, even if the resultant behavior is suppressed.

Literary character identification or feelings of empathy might be explained in just such a way; so might crying when reading about the deaths of Old Dan and Little Ann in *Where the Red Fern Grows*, or feeling fear when reading the latest Stephen King novel in your bedroom late at night. Literature can create real human emotion, as well as the more objective critical thinking valued in our standards documents; it is this emotional experience that can lead to changes in interactions with others and even epiphanies in terms of understandings of self, social justice, and diversity—those subjective realizations

that are difficult to assess, but are central to why English teachers find literature teaching important.

I have faith in literature teachers, and I believe they will continue to include literature in the curriculum, even if it does not clearly fit into a Core Standards document or is not easily assessed on a multiple choice, exam scored by a computer. I believe literature teachers will find creative ways to make literature work in even the narrowest curriculum; they will resist teaching only excerpts and isolated reading strategies as if the literary experience was simply about describing details, identifying themes, and citing textual evidence. For we all know intuitively and anecdotally that literature is far more than that; reading literature is nothing less than learning to experience the world in all its variety and consequently learning more about oneself.

### Works Cited

Holland, Norman N. *Literature and the Brain*. Gainesville, FL: The PsyArt Foundation, 2009.

Rawls, Wilson. *Where the Red Fern Grows*. New York: Yearling, 1996.