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Education Reformers Don't Know What "College Ready" Means

Submitted by John Warner on September 29, 2014 - 6:21pm

Blog: [Just Visiting](#) ^[1]

The phrase “college and career ready” is today’s education reform mantra.

It riddles the Common Core State Standards. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan includes it in just about all of his public remarks.

In April, a year-end kindergarten show in Elwood, NY was even canceled in the name of needing more time to prepare children for “college and career.” ^[2]

As someone who is tasked with teaching students at the moment they arrive in college in a course (first year writing) that just about every student will take, let me channel my inner [Inigo Montoya](#) ^[3] regarding “college and career ready”: “You keep using those words. I do not think they mean what you think they mean.”

In my experience, the skills students possess and the things they know - beyond some relatively low minimal standards – are less important for success in my course than the attitudes they bring to learning. As I consider the students who are successful, ^[1] ^[4] I see some commonalities:

In my opinion, the most important trait in any student is **curiosity**. If I have a curious student, I have a student who will learn things simply because they want to know more about the things they are learning. To me, writing is the pursuit of answers to questions we ask ourselves, and the curious student is well-skilled at asking questions of the world.

Another important key to success is students being capable of **self-regulation**. Students often struggle with the freedom of college after the strictures of high school, and the ones that can manage their own schedules, that can avoid the traps of procrastination and social-life temptations, are simply better prepared to do the work when the work comes.

My best students also have a **passion**. If a student is passionate about something, and I can (and do) design an assignment that allows them to write about their passion, they will do the best work of their academic careers. It doesn’t much matter what the passion is, and it need not be academic. It could be soccer, or dance, or fantasy football, or fashion, or building stuff out of Legos ^[2] ^[5]. The only passion that doesn’t really help them in my class is a passion for getting good grades.

Empathy is another key trait to doing well in my first-year writing class. Every assignment is written to a specific rhetorical situation with a specific audience with unique needs, attitudes, and knowledge. The ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes makes doing this significantly easier[3] [6].

Lastly, my most successful students have a **healthy skepticism of authority**[4] [7]. In my course, I am asking students to join in an academic conversation that is almost certainly being conducted by people with superior credentials, who hold positions of cultural authority. If students aren't willing to stick their noses into the discussion, they'll never have anything original to contribute.

While the Common Core State Standards look good in theory [8], as long as they are yoked to standardized assessments, we will not have students that are truly college and career ready.

High stakes standardized tests conducted on computers, with essays graded by algorithm, actively work *against* the development of the traits that are necessary for college success.

To do well in college students have to be able to exercise agency and choice, and not multiple choice from A, B, C, D and E.

The most successful students in my class would look at a question on a standardized test, and instead of trying to figure out the right answer, they would ask why they're being asked this question. They should be able to examine the assumptions behind the choice of question, to analyze the possible biases underneath it. They should be able to consider half a dozen alternate ways the question could be asked. They should be able to take a stab at writing a better question.

CCSS literature says they want to help students think critically, except that to adopt these standards and the testing that must accompany them is to enforce compliance, rather than encourage students to develop critical thinking.

This mania for assessment is crowding out much more important experiences when it comes to student development.

Those shortened recess periods and piles of nightly homework in grade school are keeping some kid from wandering through tall grasses, stumbling upon a frog, and launching a lifelong passion for herpetology.

The disappearing arts and music curriculum is preventing students from developing flexible minds (and bodies), and giving students a reason to look forward to school[5] [9].

Curriculum and teaching strategies solely designed to prepare students for standardized assessments actually destroys students' ability to self-regulate. Taken to the extreme, as in the "no-excuses" schools, we get students that can only act out of fear of punishment from authorities, or a short term bribe[6] [10].

In education, the path taken on the way to the outcome matters far more than the outcome itself. Education is a process, not a product.

The new CCSS standards are no improvement on No Child Left Behind or Race to the Top. They are, in fact, a doubling-down on the status quo that has apparently been failing us for so many years[7] [11]. "Raising standards" is meaningless if it still means teaching to a test, particularly tests created by for-profit corporations distressingly prone to screwing up [12].

There is no such thing as a standardized test worth teaching to.

The best students write their own exams and explore their own curiosities. I'd like to see us give K-12 students the space to do so under the guidance of caring teachers who are well-supported by

their communities.

For starters, let's at least put that kindergarten show back on the schedule.

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I follow lots of education experts on Twitter.

Follow @biblioracle ^[13]

[1] ^[14] Some of this depends on one's definition of "success." I consider a student who enters the class writing at a B+ level (essentially proficient), but exits writing at the same level not successful, because they haven't learned much, which is the point of the course. On the other hand, a student who starts off with a C-, but finishes with a B is successful. Armed with a good writing process, it's only a matter of time and practice before that student surpasses the stagnant, B+, student.

[2] ^[14] All of these are actual passions of former students.

[3] ^[14] It also helps with the seemingly inevitable roommate problems that crop up.

[4] ^[14] The students in Colorado protesting their school board's messing with the AP history curriculum ^[15] is a good indicator of their future success. Now, if they'd next turn their sights on the achievement tests themselves, we'd really be in business.

[5] ^[14] I sometimes get students from the Charleston County School of the Arts ^[16], which is a regional version of *Fame*, and invariably the students are well-prepared for college because high school was a place for the pursuing of their passions and doing well in the non-arts courses was required to continue in the pursuit of those passions.

[6] ^[14] In the *New York Time* profile of Success Academies CEO Eva Moskowitz, teachers in SA schools describe the "prize mountain" ^[17] sitting in the back of the classroom, incentivizing good scores on standardized tests.

[7] ^[14] Why school reformers get to blame "failing schools" on something other than their own policies is the most mystifying part of the whole debate. We've been trying what they're proposing for decades, and by their own measurements, it hasn't worked.

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[2] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/04/26/kindergarten-show-canceled-so-kids-can-keep-working-to-become-college-and-career-ready-really/>

[3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2y8Sx4B2Sk>

[4] https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/education-reformers-dont-know-what-college-ready-means#_ftn1

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[7] https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/education-reformers-dont-know-what-college-ready-means#_ftn4

[8] <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/introduction/students-who-are-college-and-career-ready-in-reading-writing-speaking-listening-language/>

- [9] https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/education-reformers-dont-know-what-college-ready-means#_ftn5
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