Quantum Shifts

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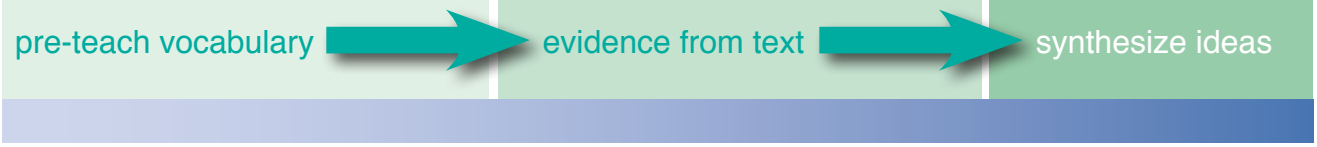

Even though Georgia is no longer a part of the PARCC consortium and the PARCC assessments no longer engender fear in the hearts of Georgia teachers, it might be a good idea to review what is different about the Common Core State Standards and decide what the quantum shifts are for the classroom and the teacher.

We know what the three big premises for the CCGPS are: 1) Regular practice with complex text and its academic language, 2) Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational, and 3) Building content knowledge through the reading of content-rich non-fiction.

O.K. What do these things really mean? I think we are getting used to the idea of text complexity, but there is an additional statement in that first premise that I consider a quantum shift - academic language. We have for many years taught vocabulary in schools, and for almost as many years we have been teaching vocabulary wrong. (I'm not casting blame here because I am guilty of using all of the strategies I talk about.) Using a vocabulary list that is unrelated to anything else that the students do provides a time-filling, but practically useless exercise. This practice is not what the CCGPS premise expects. Academic language is vocabulary that is used across all disciplines, and it includes words that students cannot recognize or define through context clues. As an example, I use the word "iterative" to describe the process for the implementation of the CCGPS. That word is an academic word which simply means that the implementation will consist of stages of development. Teachers will try things, make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, improve, and begin again. (That's what they have always done.)

The teaching of academic language, however, requires a different process. In order to scaffold the more challenging text required by the CCGPS, teachers will need to extract the academic language within a text and pre-teach that vocabulary to students using the definition of the words implied by the text. This process does require a quantum shift from the way we have always done things. Nevertheless, all research in reading will verify the idea that pre-teaching vocabulary is important. One teacher I talked to recently used the term "front-load vocabulary." I like that term. Virtually all words in the English language have more than one meaning, and it is important to teach vocabulary terms in the context in which they are used in the text.

The next quantum shift I see with the CCGPS is the idea of reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from the text. Again, we have for many years employed a version of this practice, but I don't think many of us are prepared for what it really means. Looking at the first standard for reading, students are required to extract both explicit and inferential evidence from text in order to draw conclusions or to determine a central theme or idea.

With the CCGPS, we get a whole new notion of what that process should look like. Many times we are satisfied, and sometimes we are extremely proud, that students can make inferences about a piece of text. English teachers always get excited when students are able to cite a central idea or a theme about a text. The standards, however, go a quantum step further. The student actually has to cite the evidence verbatim from the text.

Citing evidence from text has for most been a notation function, but with the standards, it becomes a direct quotation function. When a student makes an inference, that student should be able to read the passage directly from the text which has led him or her to that inference. Students should be able to read direct evidence from the text for explicit details, inferences, and central ideas or themes. I have demonstrated this process many times in close reading exercises. When a teacher asks a text-based question and a student gives an answer, the teacher's next statement should be, "Read it to me."

Well, if these two shifts aren't "quantum" enough for

you, wait until you hear the next one. Even though we are no longer a part of the PARCC consortium, the assessments created by the Georgia Department of Education will have to be rigorous. Otherwise, the standards will not be worth their weight in ink. If the new assessments are "PARCC-like" in any way, there is another major shift that I would call quantum. The assessments should require a process called "Writing to Multiple Resources and Research." Again, for many years, it has fallen upon the English teacher to teach the research process. Along with that process, we have taught students how to summarize and paraphrase text material and how to synthesize that material into a cohesive paper that bears the ideas of multiple resources.

That process, however, only teaches students how to take ideas from several texts and put them all together in a single paper. That is altogether not the idea of what the standards are addressing. The new assessments should require the student to analyze and synthesize ideas across multiple sources and texts. Now just what does that mean?

First of all, the assessments should require the student to read two or more excerpts of text before responding to the prompt or the selected response items. The prompts will almost always require an analysis of the two or more texts, but that is not all. The prompt may ask the student to write an analysis of the affect one of the texts has on the other. It requires a very specific type of analysis which involves a specific type of critical thinking. How does text A treat a subject differently than text B? Or how is something in text A treated differently in text B? This is a quantum shift that most students are not prepared for today. I really do not know how the new state assessments will shape up, but I have heard that they are being structured to be similar to the PARCC prototypes that we have seen. If that is true, teachers will need to adapt their modes of teaching to prepare students for the new assessments. I do not worry about this change in classrooms because teachers have always stepped up to the plate to address the learning that students need. The problem is, we don't have much time.

All in all, the reality is that the standards seek to move students to that third premise – Building content knowledge through the reading of content-rich non-fiction. This premise is dear to my heart, because since the inception of No Child Left Behind, we have engaged in a process of fragmenting and narrowing curriculum to the point that the only concern in the classroom is the test. I have heard many teachers say, "I teach what is tested," and to some degree that statement breaks my heart. There is so much more to the curriculum than just what is tested. That whole strand of Speaking and Listening is difficult to test, and most of the giant test developers simply ignore it. Yet, the strand represents some extremely important skills for students to develop in life.

I hope as we continue to develop units and lessons for the CCGPS, we will recognize the importance of addressing the entire curriculum and teaching to build the content knowledge students will need to embrace the future. I constantly quote Sidney Lanier's "Marshes of Glynn," and I love the line that (taken out of context) says, "I am fain to face the vast sweet visage of space." I want our students to be able to face the vast visage of space their futures hold.

This article was first published as "Common Core Shifts" in *Scribble 'n Bits*, Georgia Council of Teachers of English and has been reprinted with permission.