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The English Journal, Vol. 88, No. 4 (Mar., 1999), 82-88.

Stable URL:

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Standards Revisited: The Importance of Being There

PETER SMAGORINSKY

About ten years ago I attended a session at the annual conference of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English (IATE). The session was conducted by a group of Illinois teachers who had been involved with the English Coalition Conference held in the summer of 1987. The Conference was designed on the model of the Anglo-American Conference at Dartmouth College in 1966. The plan for both gatherings was to invite a select group of the field's best and brightest and have them spend several weeks in seclusion, providing them with the focused environment they would need to discuss the state

of the profession, look ahead to its needs, and chart out a mission statement outlining its future.

The IATE representatives were very excited about the work of the English Coalition Conference, speaking about it with ardor and a strong sense of urgency. The intensity of their experience and the sincerity of their commitment to the Coalition's recommendations came through with great power. At one point during their presentation, however, a man from the audience broke in, saying something like: "Wait! Stop right there. We're all impressed by the passion of your beliefs. But you have to remember something: *We weren't there*. We did not share your conversion experience. So when you talk to us, you can't talk to us as fellow believers but should speak to us as people who need to be convinced of something."

I'm reminded of this story whenever a commission comes out with a set of recommendations or policy statements for the rest of the field to follow. A blue-ribbon panel is charged with charting the future. They experience a transformation through the process of engagement; they become tremendously excited about the prospects for change; and they pronounce their conclusions to a broader, uninitiated public that greets them with curiosity, indiffer-

ence, or skepticism, but with little passion or stimulation to act. Remember that the English Coalition Conference was designed to change the teaching of English in profound ways. When, however, I referred to it recently when speaking with the assembled English teachers and language arts coordinators of a large, prosperous school district, not a single one of them had ever heard of it.

With this in mind, I'll confess I'm worried about the future of the IRA/NCTE Standards. Most of us *weren't there* during the development of the standards. Most of us know of them through announcements and publications from IRA or NCTE, or perhaps through articles in the popular press. Most English teachers had little to do with their development. In my view, if teachers are to believe in standards and want to implement them, then they need to *be there*: They need to participate in the conversations that produce the standards they seek to enact through their teaching.

My goal, then, is for every English department or elementary faculty in every school to undertake its own standards project. I see the IRA/NCTE standards as the *beginning* of a process that teachers—or, more to the point, departments and faculties—need to be intensely involved in if they

are to take standards seriously. I outline here a set of considerations that I think are important if teachers are to do this.

What Do We Talk about When We Talk about Standards?

A fundamental question that teachers should discuss when developing standards is, Which definition(s) of standards are we referring to? One of the problems in the national debate over standards is that different people in the same conversation often have different definitions in mind. I'd like to review several definitions and clarify which one is behind the IRA/NCTE project. In doing so, I'd like to suggest that teachers consider the implications of other definitions as well when developing their own standards.

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Meaning #1: *Making things the same for all students*. This notion of standards is evident in E. D. Hirsch's core curriculum, where students in every school study the same content. Presumably, then, Americans will have a common knowledge base and better sense of nationhood, and our citizens will have better comprehension of those issues that are based on this common core of knowledge. This meaning of standards is also at work in the idea of "standard English," which presumes that there is a single, official set of rules for grammar and usage that should govern speech in all situations. We ad-

ditionally see this notion of standards behind standardized tests, which provide a single assessment designed for all, thus providing a single means of comparison for schools ranging across the country.

Meaning #2: *Minimum level of performance*. Bill Clinton has called for a national goal whereby all third graders will be able to read. I'm not sure exactly what he means by this, but I see this as a good example of a standard that specifies a minimum level of performance, an assessable baseline set of competencies. We also see this notion of standards at work in many state-mandated curriculum documents that identify grade-level performance that all students must achieve. These competencies are described at the low end—that is, the lowest acceptable level of performance before promotion to the next grade.

Meaning #3: *Typology of competencies*. This meaning of standards is the one found in the IRA/NCTE standards and refers to a range of areas in which students must be proficient. The level of performance, however, is never described, nor are all students expected to meet the standards in a uniform way. Take, for instance, IRA/NCTE standard #2: "Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience." This standard does not specify how much literature, which periods or genres, or what degree of understanding a student should reach; nor does it state that each student should read the same literature or come to the same understanding.

I will return to these three meanings later. For now, it's important to remember that when talking about standards, people need to agree on what they're talking about.

Whose Standards?

The IRA/NCTE standards were developed by a select, though large and diverse, set of IRA and NCTE members representing over a quarter of a million teachers worldwide. Although they represent a degree of diversity, they tend to share values on teaching and learning that are

- student-centered rather than centered on teachers' knowledge
- activity-oriented rather than inactive
- constructivist rather than received

- interaction-based and collaborative rather than individual
- multidirectional rather than unidirectional
- open-ended rather than predetermined
- built on students' personal lives rather than being solely text-based
- based on principles generally associated with "progressive" education, whole language approaches, the "growth" model of education, and multiculturalism

As such, the IRA/NCTE standards are not values-neutral but have a liberal perspective; that is, they view education as an experience that changes people (both students and teachers) rather than as an institution that preserves and perpetuates historical values. Teachers and students are therefore inquirers and explorers who share (and question) authority. Knowledge is thus constructed and evanescent, and learning is a growth process requiring reflection and inquiry. The values with which we grow up are thus not necessarily the best values for all or even for ourselves but are continually evolving through exposure to and contrast with diverse sets of beliefs.

These liberal values are not shared by all members of the general public or all members of the teaching profession. To give one example, I was teaching a graduate course in the teaching of writing, and one of the texts we read touted the benefits of introspective writing such as journals. One of the teachers in the class taught at a rural middle school and said that she could never use any of the activities recommended in the book in her school district. She then showed us a letter that a conservative religious organization had distributed to parents in her community, urging them to sign it and send it to their board of education. The letter began by asserting that under United States legislation and court decisions, parents have the primary responsibility for their children's education, and pupils have certain rights that schools may not deny. Parents have the right to assure that their children's beliefs and moral values will not be undermined by schools, and pupils have the right to have and hold their moral values without manipulation by schools. Schools may not, therefore, elicit the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, or feelings of students; engage students in values clarification (including role playing, considering moral dilemmas, etc.); have students discuss interpersonal relationships or attitudes toward par-

ents; elicit students' beliefs about politics or religion; require autobiographical writing including journals and log books; or require self-revelation or self-evaluation through classroom assignments and activities. These are just the sorts of activities, however, typically associated with the kind of learning and pedagogy called for in the IRA/NCTE standards.

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Many liberal educators are quick to dismiss conservative Christians as ignorant and naive, easily manipulated by televangelists and conservative politicians. After having lived in the Bible Belt for several years now, I don't buy this form of dismissal—it strikes me as stereotypical in ways usually abhorred by liberals. While I don't share their view of the purpose of schooling, I do respect conservative Christians' views on how to build a strong (if exclusive) community, and I think that they do a pretty good job of it for the most part. I can see how the IRA/NCTE standards would be antithetical to the expectations for schooling found in many such communities. I've even heard a highly placed NCTE official state at a national conference that the IRA/NCTE standards "trample" the values of some American citizens, a problem he lamented yet a problem he said should not stop the organization from developing and promoting standards based on progressive principles.

My point is not to criticize either the IRA/NCTE standards or those communities who reject them. My point is simply to clarify that the IRA/

NCTE standards are undergirded by a liberal ideology that is not shared by all. Unlike some people in NCTE, I would like to see competing standards projects developed so we as a field could have greater perspective on the issue of standards and schooling. I would like to see what English language arts standards would look like if developed by

- parents from various conservative or orthodox religious groups
- urban minority parents (or subgroups therein)
- rural parents
- a gay/lesbian task force
- students
- dropouts
- K–12 English language arts teachers who are not members of IRA or NCTE
- university English professors who belong to the Modern Language Association but not IRA or NCTE
- teachers at exclusive private schools
- English language arts teachers in each school district in the U.S.A.

I think that the national dialogue about standards would be much better informed if we heard from these groups and others. The IRA/NCTE standards are designed, I think, to be inclusive, yet many perspectives have been excluded from the official discussion and platform. The most important group omitted has been the vast group of rank-and-file teachers who are expected to enact the standards. Without their involvement, the standards will be implemented idiosyncratically and without sufficient commitment and will thus diminish as a factor in discussions and decisions about teaching.

What Is English?

When developing standards for English language arts, teachers need to define their discipline. In some ways this task is easy, for the subject of English has historically included the teaching and learning of literature, writing, and language. As society becomes more complex and interdependent, however, drawing the boundaries of a discipline becomes more difficult; indeed, interdisciplinary learning becomes more important. “Writing,” for instance, describes a broad set of practices. Does it include writing business letters? Keyboarding skills? Hand-

writing? Songwriting? Writing across the curriculum, and thus in other disciplines? Deciding what’s included helps to decide what the standards ought to address.

Beyond the question of how to define a traditional strand of the curriculum such as writing, teachers need to think about what else is involved in a modern conception of “English language arts.” The study of film and television? Opera and popular music? Uses of the Internet? Art and dance? Most teachers recognize the difficulty of circumscribing the field of English/arts; doing so, however, is critical to deciding what kinds of standards should apply to the field.

Goals for Schooling and Students and Notions of the Ideal Adult

All teachers, I think, teach with an ideal in mind: a sense of what someone is like following an education. The Greeks used the word *telos* to describe our sense of an optimal outcome or ideal destination; cultural psychologists such as Michael Cole have used the word *prolepsis* to describe the ways in which people construct social environments to help bring about those endpoints in others. I think that in order for teachers to discuss standards, they need to uncover for themselves what kind of citizen they are hoping to encourage through their instruction.

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A number of educational writers have proposed that education ought to be devoted to cultivating particular traits. I next present a list of some I have come across in my recent reading. The traits are not necessarily incompatible, though some clearly are; and each trait is open to interpretations other than the one outlined by these authors. Each of these traits, however, implies a set of practices

for schooling in terms of how teachers arrange learning contexts and experiences for students. The following educational writers have written lengthy justifications that schooling should be devoted to producing students, and ultimately adults, who are

- caring (Noddings)
- subversive (Postman & Weingartner)
- thoughtful (Brown)
- culturally literate (Hirsch)
- civic-minded (Stotsky)
- imaginative (Bogdan)
- democratic (Dewey)
- joyous (Newman)
- virtuous (Bennett)
- politically liberated (Freire)
- personally liberated (Montessori)
- self-motivated (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson)
- scientific (Piaget)
- skeptical (Foucault)
- reflective (Schön)
- free (Greene)
- domestic (Martin)
- inquiring (Dewey)

This list is not intended to be comprehensive. My point is that teachers are future-oriented; that is, they see their work as having consequences for how students turn out. They also believe that there are better and worse ways to turn out, and that these beliefs have implications for the kinds of teaching they do and the kinds of expectations they have for students. Any effort to develop standards for students needs to acknowledge what these teleological assumptions are and account for them in the ultimate form of the standards.

Metaphors for Schooling

Another way to help think about standards is to consider metaphors for representing the process of schooling. A number of metaphors are commonly used to describe schools and their functions. I'll review a few, with examples of their implications for teaching and learning.

School as Factory

When school is viewed as a factory, teachers are seen as workers and students as products. Both become forms of capital. Schooling conducted in this way seeks a uniform set of procedures and products

and the most efficient way of production. Schools must be accountable in measurable ways (test scores, cost/production ratios, etc.). Preserving the chain of command is important, suggesting a hierarchy running from administrators at the top to students on the bottom.

School as Health Care

In this view of schooling, students are viewed as diseased, and it is the teacher's job to cure them. Diagnosing deficiencies and providing corrective instruction is a central teaching practice. Students are largely viewed in terms of their deficits, and teachers' success comes through their rate of curing. This metaphor has come somewhat to life in the recent trend to diagnose unsuccessful or unruly students as having disabilities and to treat them with medication.

School as Prison

This metaphor has been quite durable among students for many generations. Adults, too, can see school as a place designed to punish offenders. Writing teachers have often lamented the ways in which disciplinarians use writing in punitive ways (e.g., writing "I will not . . ." a hundred times). Schools in which teachers are required, on the first day of school, to detail classroom management plans that center on escalating forms of punishment seem to reinforce students' idea that school is a prison.

School as War

It's common to hear teaching described as a profession conducted "on the front lines" or "in the trenches"; sadly, this characterization often comes from teachers themselves. This bellicose notion of teaching presents students and teachers (and teachers and administrators, teachers and parents, etc.) as being in a perpetual state of opposition and combat. Students are thus seen as a group that needs to be conquered or subdued because of the threat they pose to teachers' security and authority.

School as Athletics

This metaphor is similar to the *School as War*, though the combat is not quite so deadly and the competition is with other students rather than the teacher. Teachers put students through drills on fundamentals as preparation for high-stakes, winner-takes-all competitions (i.e., exams). The metaphors

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to describe the teacher are not consistent. On the one hand, educators often describe the teacher as a benevolent “coach” who gives personal advice, nurtures students along, and is warm and friendly. I played competitive sports for many years and don’t remember meeting a coach quite like this. Most yelled a lot, seemed to dislike their players (especially the ones who weren’t very good), and were much more concerned with their own coaching records than with their players’ development as human beings. Yet this image persists among educational writers, most of whom I must conclude probably never played competitive, organized sports.

Teacher as Gardener

Teaching is also seen as a form of cultivation. Teachers provide a fertile ground for growth, plant their seeds with care, know the proper type and amount of stimulation for each type of plant, and otherwise raise a crop of healthy, hearty, prosperous students through tender loving care. On the downside of this metaphor, teachers weed out the bad students or separate the grain from the chaff. In general, though, healthy growth through care and nourishment are the primary goals of schooling as gardening.

Each of these metaphors has different implications for how to teach and what kind of student turns out in the end. The list is probably not comprehensive. My point is that teachers who consider the issue of educational standards ought to examine their metaphors for schooling to help identify their

assumptions about what they expect students to do and how they mean to help them do it.

Developing Standards School by School

I should reiterate that my purpose is not to criticize the IRA/NCTE standards. It is rather to say that the standards should provide a starting point for both local and national discussions of what it means to have standards, what effects standards can have, and how we go about developing them. I offer here a set of questions that teachers might consider—preferably in discussions with their colleagues, and possibly through formal initiatives—on what their own standards might be.

1. How do you rate each IRA/NCTE standard according to your agreement with it as a central focus of instruction in English language arts?
2. What standards are missing that you would add?
3. How do your standards fit with the overriding values of the citizens and faculty of the community in which you teach?
4. How do you put these standards into practice?
5. Which other meanings of “standards” do you think are important to put into operation along with the meaning employed in the IRA/NCTE standards?
6. What notion of the ideal adult, and what metaphors about schooling, are suggested by your revised standards?
7. How will you assess students’ meeting of these standards?

Though seemingly simple, these questions are difficult to answer. I imagine that each faculty will answer them somewhat differently. I also imagine that, unless each faculty goes through a process like this, the IRA/NCTE standards will not have the effect they are hoping for. It’s important that every teacher *be there* during these discussions. Otherwise, ten years from now we may ask groups of teachers if they remember the standards project and have them look back blankly, neither converted, nor impressed by, nor even aware of this monumental effort.

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EJ 75 YEARS AGO

And the First Shall Be . . . Overwhelmed?

"When boys and girls enter college before they have decided on their life career, they should be urged to think about the choice, at least, during their Freshman year. Now the English course has never put up any signs, 'No dumping allowed,' consequently whenever a new subject is to be tried out the authorities always think of the English department and of the English teacher. No wonder the English department is the most expensive department in a school. No wonder the health of English teachers fails more frequently than that of their brother, the history, or the science, teacher. If Tomlinson had been an English teacher, I feel sure Saint Peter would have admitted him."

Calvin T. Ryan. "Careers in College Composition Classes." *EJ* 13:2 (1924) 120–124.
