

## Turning Reform Inside Out

When Edna Shoemaker sailed into an urban high school in Sacramento, California, she pledged to get her students ready for college. As one of the “gang of five,” a group of teachers who transferred to this high school in the fall of 1990, Shoemaker challenged her students “to write more, write in different ways, and demonstrate their critical thinking” (all Shoemaker quotes in this chapter are from a personal communication, September 3, 2014).

It was an ideal time for knowledgeable, determined teachers to work together, according to Jayne Marlink, who instigated the group’s transfer. “On one hand, we were jazzed because of the Transition to College curriculum we had been developing for several years. [See Chapter 5 for a description of the T2C program.] On the other hand, we had just finished scoring student writing on the district proficiency test. The students in our new high school had come up very short” (all Marlink quotes in this chapter are from a personal communication, September 5, 2014).

At first students were leery of the new, tougher, T2C classes. “It took a while,” said Shoemaker, “but gradually students sought out the more demanding classes.” One moment of truth was when Shoemaker’s 12th-graders, having read one Shakespeare play, asked to read a second. “They saw Shakespeare as the currency of college,” Shoemaker explains, “and they wanted to be on board.”

But there was another, perhaps more subtle, dynamic at play here. It seemed that high expectations and rigorous academic demands actually built confidence so students could step into the next challenge. “They discovered they could do hard things and they could understand things for themselves,” Shoemaker explains.

Shoemaker also felt she could do hard things, thanks to the T2C program.

I was not handed a box of what I was supposed to teach. We developed a curriculum that matched our students and our vision for them. For example, we wanted our students to think critically about literature in general, to consider what it takes for a piece of literature to be a classic. After they read *Their Eyes Are Watching God*, we had

them read a Richard Wright essay that excoriated the book and an Alice Walker essay that found it of great value. Then the students had to argue whether this should still be a core novel at our high school.

“Part of being in the ‘gang of five’ is that I was given permission to take risks and missteps,” says Shoemaker. “We were a community of learners together, teachers and students. The rule was to tell the truth about how we learn, why we learn, and what makes it hard to learn.”

In fact, Shoemaker and her colleagues had an abundance of what it takes to move students who were traditionally not enrolled in college prep classes in the direction of college and satisfying careers. They based the curriculum on themes that affected their students’ lives. They included a substantial amount of nonfiction and taught a range of writing, “some personal, some text-based, with an emphasis on analysis, synthesis, research, and argument.” Their units helped students move from personal to analytical writing, and paid “special attention to the study of the demands and culture of college” (Center for Research and Extension Services for Schools, 2000, p. 61). They also had the benefits of professional collaboration and leaders in their ranks, particularly those like Marlink who knew an opportunity when she saw one and started an influx of great teachers into high schools that needed them most. As Shoemaker said, the ticket to learning is to work together—teachers and students alike—and to be thoughtful about how and why we learn.

The classroom should be what it is trying to foster. (Eisner, 1985, p. 365)

### **TAKING THE PLUNGE: TEACHERS IN THE LEAD**

What stands out for us in this story is that teachers seized on the idea of working from the *inside* to give their students a first-class ticket to their next destination. Shoemaker and her colleagues are, of course, among thousands of teachers who have pulled out all the stops for their students, figuring out how to put college and career in their futures. Their success illustrates once again that teachers are at the center of change. In the thoughtful hands of great teachers, classrooms and whole schools can be transformed.

But this kind of transformation does not happen when teachers are on what Elliot Eisner (1985) calls “the assembly line.” According to Eisner, “if one is primarily interested in control and measured outcome, the best way to do it is to disallow the adventitious, to focus attention on highly discrete and highly defined tasks and to assess after each task in order to determine whether the objectives of the tasks have been achieved” (p. 20).

Furthermore, teachers in the classroom today are bound to come up against interpretations of the Common Core that could push them toward

one extreme or another. Too often these interpretations defy common sense. For example, the CCSS directs students to “cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.” In her article “Reading Is About More Than Evidence,” Mia Hood (2014) notes how this focus has the potential, if slavishly followed, to drastically alter the way we read: “The trouble is that when students read in this way, they don’t recognize all that text does and can do besides serving as evidence. The first standard doesn’t acknowledge the way text elicits thinking and draws out new ideas, curiosities, frustrations, causes, and sometimes even pursuits” (para. 12).

While no one can anticipate every possible anomaly that might surface around the Common Core, what seems most important is to encourage teachers to take their rightful place as leaders and professionals. To this end, we will revisit the CCSS for writing with a slightly different lens, first by reminding ourselves again about what the standards mean and don’t mean. And then we will make the case that teachers are the main players in this era of reform.

### **DIVING DEEPER: SOME REMINDERS OF WHAT’S WHAT**

The CCSS are not a curriculum. They provide a flexible kind of road map for teaching writing and identify ultimate destinations, but they do not require a particular route for getting there.

Misinterpretations of the standards pop up routinely, and over and over again, like weeds. The idea that the CCSS are a curriculum is one of them. The CCSS anchor standards do prioritize key concepts and skills that are fundamental to writing and map out some of what learners should be able to accomplish. As destinations, the anchor standards are must-sees. But a curriculum also has content, teaching and learning activities, projects, simulations, reading and video materials, assignments, assessments, planned events, and so on. Don’t be fooled or persuaded that standards and curriculum mean the same thing. Just as you would work with your students on the credibility of their sources, keep an eye on the claims and promises that are sure to accompany the next generation of resources and materials.

Without a doubt, production of canned curricula will continue. And even worse, publishers and others will develop a required reading list in the name of Common Core. Buyers beware: There is no CCSS required reading list. In his opinion piece “The Conservative Case for Common Core,” William Bennett (2014) notes that “textbook companies have marketed their books disingenuously, leading many parents to believe that under Common Core the government mandates particular textbooks. Also not true” (p. A11).

Another “weed in the garden” is the idea that the grade-level standards for the three types of writing identified in the CCSS are step-by-step recipes for good writing. For instance, the grade 8–level standard for argumentative writing states that students should be able to “acknowledge and distinguish . . . claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims” by grade 8 (CCSSO & NGA, 2010, p. 42). What it *doesn't* say is that all good arguments *require* the acknowledgment of opposing claims. Once again, it's a matter of fending off misinterpretations, particularly those that would standardize teaching and learning and writing itself.

The CCSS focus on college and career ready skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening serves a particular function in today's climate, spurred on as it is by economic factors and business needs. But school should never be just a preparation for the next grade level or for some unknown job. School is not just about skills, or as Eisner (1985) says, “about being able to swim four laps of the pool to be able to swim in the deep end” (p. 117). School is about the present moment. It's about discovery, surprises, engagement, conversations, learning from peers, following passions, and participating right now in being a citizen.

Being college and career ready is not the only goal of education.

School is also about the qualities of mind and characteristics of humanity we wish to foster. Consider the habits of mind in Figure 6.1 deemed “essential for success in college writing,” and we would say for success in life as well (Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, 2011, p.1).

#### Figure 6.1. Habits of Mind Needed for Success in College Writing

- Curiosity: the desire to know more about the world.
- Openness: the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- Engagement: a sense of investment and involvement in learning.
- Creativity: the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
- Persistence: the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.
- Responsibility: the ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.
- Flexibility: the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
- Metacognition: the ability to reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.

(Note. List taken from the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* developed collaboratively by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, 2011, p.1.)

Whether or not certain qualities of mind guarantee that students will write well in college, they are undoubtedly important parts of every student's education. The bottom line is that a curriculum should not get completely skewed toward one thing or another—college and career prep or test readiness or overemphasis on one subject like reading or math to the exclusion of others. Diane Ravitch (2013), now a critic of current public policies, provides this blueprint for a good education:

All children need the chance to develop their individual talents. And all need the opportunity to learn the skills of working and playing and singing with others. Whatever the careers of the twenty-first century may be, they are likely to require creativity, thoughtfulness, and the capacity for social interaction and personal initiative, not simple routine skills. All children need to be prepared as citizens to participate in a democratic society. (p. 241)

Whereas Ravitch is concerned that schools will shrink the curriculum to training only for job and college, rather than aiming for good thinkers and good citizens, educational philosopher John Dewey's interest was in the nature of school itself. Dewey (1893) challenges the idea that school exists simply to prepare students for some future endeavor: "if I were asked to name the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education, I should say: "Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make of it the full meaning of the present life" (p. 660).

Probably every one of us, sometime during our school years, wondered why we had to suffer through a particular torture just so we could be ready for the next torture in the next class or grade. School has to be more than getting ready, getting by, or getting through. A 7th-grader once told us that she really liked school—"But it just eats up so much of the day," she said wistfully. And don't we know it! We hardly need to remind teachers of the hours spent in school, nor of the need to make those hours meaningful at the moment.

Recently, a gaggle of 1st-graders passed in front of us on their way out of the fire station, all of them sporting plastic fire hats. They formed a crooked, meandering line as they looked back at the fire trucks. Some of those children may one day become firefighters because of their field trip. For some, the trip will be just a nice, perhaps somewhat blurry memory. But at that moment, when the children patted their heads to check on their hats (and almost all of them did), there was pure joy and, we guess, a good amount of learning.

Teachers are a special population. Almost everyone has had one, if not many, and certainly everyone seems to have an opinion about them. We checked out an array of bumper stickers aimed at teachers and teaching. In some sense, they all seem to be reacting to a public

Teachers are  
at the heart of  
the matter.

perception about what teachers do and how they do it. Here are some familiar examples:

Teachers do it better.

If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.

I'm a teacher . . . What's your superpower?

I teach for the outcome, Not the income.

Those who can, Teach. Those who cannot pass laws about teaching.

Warning: Driver may be grading papers.

If you can read this—thank a teacher.

The bumper sticker we like best is this one: “Amazing teacher in action.” Who else in the world has to take charge all day long, make decisions, tackle problems, work with students, collaborate with colleagues, design curriculum, create lesson plans, assess progress, showcase student accomplishments, communicate with parents, attend meetings, supervise clubs and activities, participate in committees, rearrange classroom furniture, and by the way, be kind, considerate, sensitive, entertaining, and stimulating? And there's one more thing. Teachers hold the key to deep and lasting changes in education.

The story that follows comes from the field of medicine, but it can be applied to education. Think about “amazing teachers in action” and what it takes to make improvements in teaching and learning: It takes the people on the ground who bring essential knowledge and wisdom to any kind of reform.

### THE POWER OF POSITIVE DEVIANCE

In his book *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance*, Atul Gawande (2007) describes an age-old problem with hospital infections in our country and names the culprit: lack of proper hand washing. His story takes place at a veterans hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where those in command made every possible move to encourage hand washing, from educating and scolding to bringing in engineers to install gel dispensers in each hospital room. Still, alarmingly, the infections persisted and, in some cases, medical personnel rebelled against all the outside forces telling them what to do.

It seemed, then, that even the best, most innovative solutions brought into the hospital failed to produce lasting change. But the belief that things could be turned around did not disappear. One of the hospital surgeons had read about *positive deviance*—the idea of working from the inside, building

on capabilities people already have instead of bringing in outside “experts” to tell them how they need to change. In March 2005, health care workers on every level—food service workers, janitors, nurses, doctors, and even patients—came together in a series of small-group discussions. The leaders, headed by the surgeon, introduced the session by saying, “We’re here because of the hospital infection problem and we want to know what *you* know about how to solve it.”

What happened next is a solid testimony to the power of positive deviance:

Ideas came pouring out. People told of places where hand-gel dispensers were missing, ways to keep gowns and gloves from running out of supply, nurses who always seem able to wash their hands, and even taught patients to wash their hands too. Many people said it was the first time anyone had ever asked them what to do. The norms began to shift. When forty new hand-gel dispensers arrived, staff members took charge of putting them in the right places. Nurses who would never speak up when a doctor failed to wash his or her hands began to do so after learning of other nurses who did. (Gawande, 2007, p. 26)

This “*inside team*” conducted the follow-through, posting monthly results. All the ideas got publicity on the hospital website and in newsletters. “One year into the experiment—and after years without widespread progress—the entire hospital saw its MRSA [antibiotic resistant bacteria, *Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus*] wound infection rates drop to zero,” Gawande explains (pp. 26–27).

So what made the difference? It was positive deviance. It was an unbeatable approach to making change: empowering the people-in-the-know and investing in their knowledge and abilities.

The teachers whose stories we have recounted in this book are shining examples of positive deviance. When Edna Shoemaker joined “the gang of five” in her Sacramento high school, she was fairly new to the profession. “At that time, I was still trying to find my way as a teacher,” she says. But she and her four colleagues set their sights on sending students to college and then figured out everything they needed to do to make it happen, using each other as resources and bringing in what they had learned from other colleagues who taught in college.

Remember Jerry Halpern and John Davis, the two Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania teachers who started out observing each other and then decided to teach each other’s classes? From these beginnings, Halpern and Davis felt confident to take more risks, to talk frankly about successes and failures, to take on the challenge of literacy portfolios, and ultimately, to involve the entire English department in reflective discussions. They exemplify positive deviance at its best: building their own capacities so they and their colleagues could make steady improvements in their teaching.

Tracy Freyre and her colleagues were positive deviants when they worked together to create a unit for English language learners that built on what they knew about their students, on their combined knowledge of how to scaffold, and on what they found out when they tried out their own assignment. So while they were building their students' abilities, they were also building their own abilities as teachers.

When Stan Pesick invited teachers to ask their own questions about the teaching and learning of argumentative writing, he created a community of positive deviants. From those questions, teachers developed a series of lessons to test out in their own classrooms. This approach puts teachers in charge of working through all the necessary steps, the ins and outs of what it takes to teach *their* students to write arguments. Pesick put it this way: "Rather than inviting in an outside person, teachers drive their own professional development" (personal communication, March 18, 2014).

Judy Kennedy wanted seniors to know what it means to be a good citizen. Instead of lecturing at length from her own experience and expertise, she sent them out in the world to tackle local problems that needed fixing. An act of positive deviance. Liz Harrington wanted her middle schoolers to learn about literary analysis. Instead of locking them into a traditional form of writing, she hooked them on blogging where they learned and practiced the features of analysis. She built on their capacities to communicate with each other through social media. An act of positive deviance. Zack Lewis-Murphy bypassed other less inspiring, skill-based exercises when he plunged his struggling 7th-graders into a writing task that built on their common knowledge about food. An act of positive deviance.

And then there are the two Jims. Jim Gray bucked tradition when he started the Writing Project, placing his faith in teachers and in their capacities to grow and to help each other grow. He tracked down successful writing teachers "who knew and believed in what they were doing," and who could teach their colleagues if given the opportunity:

I knew that the knowledge successful teachers had gained through their experience and practice in the classroom was not tapped, sought after, shared, or for the most part, even known about. I knew also that if there was ever going to be reform in American education, it was going to take place in the nation's classrooms. And because teachers—and no one else—were in those classrooms, I knew that for reform to succeed, teachers had to be at the center. (Gray, 2000, p. 50)

As for Jim Moffett, he was not walking on a world stage when he dared to define a universe of discourse for a worldwide audience of teachers and university faculty members. As a visionary and pioneer, he challenged the curriculum of the day and threw open the doors for what was possible in the teaching of writing. Regina Foehr (1997) provides more evidence that Jim Moffett was a positive deviant:



In academia, we too often take ourselves too seriously and don't look at the lighter side, sometimes even fear reprisal if we explore the unconventional or write what we really believe. We favor instead the safety of tradition. When Jim and I talked about his willingness to follow his intuition beyond the safety of established boundaries—to write, for example, on unconventional topics—he always modestly downplayed any particular courage. He seemed to think he simply enjoyed a freedom of expression as an independent writer that institutional affiliation would have denied him. (p. 6)

### **BRINGING POSITIVE DEVIANCE TO THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

Unlike Jim Moffett, most of us work within institutions where it sometimes takes special courage to map out a route that makes sense for our students. Being a positive deviant is not always so easy. It seems to us, however, that the CCSS make way for teachers to build their own writing curriculum and to grow their own expertise. And in fact, they provide a solid defense for doing so.

Let's take one more look at the CCSS—through the eyes of a positive deviant. The CCSS have goals we can believe in. We want all students to be ready for and successful in college and careers. The CCSS leave teaching to teachers. That's us, the people on the inside and at the heart of the matter. The CCSS identify uncommonly good ideas for the curriculum teachers will develop, like integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and uncommonly good ideas for teaching writing, like paying attention to purpose and audience. What's more, the good ideas have a long track record in writing classrooms. They are not from outer space. They endure because they work. Teachers discovered them long ago and over the years have helped each other learn to use them effectively.

We have called these good ideas “must-sees” because they are the main attractions, the five-star, not-to-be-missed approaches to teaching writing. They show up in the Common Core unfettered by scripts or pacing guides. Teachers can decide, for example, when and for how long their students need to practice a particular kind of writing or a process like revision. It's the must-sees that distinguish the CCSS.

Are there drawbacks to the CCSS? Sure. Their very existence causes the fur to fly. Anytime bureaucrats formulate a blanket set of standards, rules, or policies, you can count on a backlash, not to mention zealots on one side or another who take every word literally or pull words out of context. But nothing can eliminate the teacher:

Once the important concepts and generalizations are identified at a national level for a particular field of study, the way in which they are transformed into

an operational curriculum for students is a task for the teacher or the faculty of the school. In this way both national and local needs can be met.” (Eisner, 1985, p. 139)

In case Eisner’s theory seems disingenuous given the last decade or more of what stood for reform, take a second look. The writers of the CCSS ELA may not have sent out engraved invitations to teachers, but they surely put their money on giving teachers the authority to teach. The CCSS “let teachers teach” is more than a tip of the hat. It’s an authentic, bonafide recognition of who is central to the whole enterprise of education. Every time a group of students reads, talks, and writes about different cultures and values, about human suffering and resilience, about the planet Earth or the solar universe, there is an amazing teacher in action who has planned, taught, and orchestrated the lesson. Every time a group of students tries on a new kind of writing or a new way of thinking, there is a teacher cracking open another door or opportunity for those students to get ahead.

But of course teachers don’t have to go it alone. Positive deviance in communities like the Writing Project means providing places for teachers to look to each other for “existing uncommon, successful behaviors and strategies” (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010, p. 196). Often an innovative idea comes from someone who “does not know he or she is doing anything unusual. Yet once the unique solution is discovered and understood, it can be adopted by the wider community and transform many lives” (p. 3).

The bit of truth—that people often don’t credit their ingenuity and know-how—is true of many teachers. But this is not a time for modesty nor for holding back what could be an important contribution. If ever there were a time for teachers to work together, it’s now.

We urge our colleagues to take the plunge and dive a little deeper during this era when writing has made a comeback. Be fearless. Explore those must-sees. This is the moment to build your own and your students’ capacities in the positive deviant way. And remember to share what you learn. Keep those professional conversations going. We can never have too many.