



Students don't learn in a vacuum.
**Higher knowledge is built
on prior knowledge.**

Text and truth

**Reading, student
experience, and
the Common Core**

Prereading is alive and well in the expectations for the Common Core.

**BY SUSAN SANDLER AND
ZARETTA HAMMOND**

One of the rumors making the rounds of K-12 educators goes something like this: The Common Core State Standards don't allow "prereading" — the pedagogical practice meant to help students better understand a text they're about to read — or for that matter any classroom activities that contextualize a text through outside sources. The interesting part of the rumor isn't the rumor itself: It's just a misinterpretation of the Publisher's Criteria for the standards, which clearly state that "Student background knowledge and experiences can illuminate the reading . . ." (Coleman & Pimentel, p. 7). What makes the misunderstanding interesting and vitally relevant to teachers is that it sheds light on some of the practices and underlying assumptions that have diluted the potency of reading education for years.

Plainly stated: Prereading is no substitute for actual reading, but that doesn't mean that drawing on information outside the core text is a bad idea. In fact, one of the best ways to teach analytical reading is to actively tap into students' prior knowledge — the rich base of existing experiences and information that they bring with them to class each day.

The Common Core allows prior knowledge, and the growing body of literature about the neuroscience of learning tells us it's key to the way humans build our interrelated networks of knowledge. As we move toward full implementation of the Common Core, we must make sure that we help students leverage their prior knowledge, both to help strengthen their analytical skills and to lay a solid foundation for further learning.

The controversy

Let's start at the heart of the controversy by explaining why the Common Core guidance says what it does about prereading: Too often, well-meaning teachers are giving students a predigested version of the text before students ever get a chance to interact with the text. Doing that too often can cheat students of a chance to build their own analytical muscles as they tackle challenging text.

The teachers' intentions are honorable — they're merely trying to level the playing field among students who frequently have disparate academic and personal backgrounds. For example, most middle school students could read and understand the basic plot lines of *The Last of the Mohicans*, which shows up on the 8th-grade reading list. But not all students will know enough about the social, economic, and political implications of America's westward expansion to

understand the motivations of some characters and the historical significance of the book.

However, providing too much information up front in prereading activities can undermine the student's ability to use his experience to figure out the text for himself, which is at the heart of analytical reading. The Common Core, designed to help make every student college- and career-ready, was built on the well-founded expectation that students must do better than merely mastering basic reading comprehension. It's no accident that eight of the 10 anchor standards in reading involve analysis, inference, and/or evaluation.

Prereading activities that give students a preanalyzed version of the core text can actually prevent students from acquiring the foundational skills and capacity for analysis, inference, and evaluating evidence. This capacity only grows from wrestling with a text. Often, in prereading, teachers tell students what the text will cover, its key points and arguments, and why they're important. By the time students get to the actual text, they may feel there's no point in reading it, much less wrestling with it. If they do read it, they'll have a much more limited opportunity to develop those crucial grappling skills because the text has already been predigested for them. Unsurprisingly, grappling with how a text is constructed and why is difficult if you already have the answers.

The reality

Some educators have interpreted cautions against misusing prereading to mean that teaching to the Common Core should exclude incorporating information outside of the text, up to and including the experiences and background that a reader brings to reading.

But let's not substitute one misunderstanding with another: While activities that draw from beyond the text must never preempt or replace the text, they can and should be judiciously and thoughtfully used to help deepen students' understanding of the text.

Specifically with regard to students' prior knowl-

SUSAN SANDLER oversees the education portfolio of the Sandler Foundation, San Francisco, Calif. **ZARETTA HAMMOND** is an independent researcher, literacy specialist, and curriculum developer at the National Equity Project, Oakland, Calif.

edge, prohibiting students from applying their experiences and knowledge as they read would be not only futile but actively counterproductive for the Common Core.

Students don't learn in a vacuum. Higher knowledge is built on prior knowledge. Research confirms that making connections between new information and ideas and what we've already experienced plays a central role in learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

Prereading is no substitute for actual reading, **but that doesn't mean that drawing on information outside the core text is a bad idea.**

Indeed, prior knowledge is crucial to developing some of the key skills required to meet the Common Core, especially analyzing, drawing inferences, and evaluating evidence. To master these skills, students must keep the text at the center while extrapolating from the literal words to a series of conclusions. Students can only do this by strategically checking the text against their existing bank of images, associations, ideas, and information.

The solution

Students will draw on prior knowledge on their own, but teachers can powerfully accelerate students' mastery of analytical reading with active strategies that tap into what they already know.

Prompting

Rather than preloading background information or quickly supplying it when students become confused by the text, teachers can provide cues, clues, and prompts to help students use their untapped prior knowledge to navigate the text at key points. Teachers can help students leverage their own experience to construct analogies that help the student explain what's going on in the text.

Bridging with enabling texts

Teachers can use "enabling" companion texts, which can pave the way to reading traditional challenging texts (Tatum, 2009). Enabling texts are closer to students' lived experiences, and though they are

no less challenging, their more familiar setting or context makes it easier for students to draw on their prior knowledge to analyze and infer (Willingham, 2009). This text acts as a bridge to a more traditional text that has similar themes and complexities but a less familiar setting.

Leveraging cultural knowledge

Part of becoming an analytical reader is developing the capacity to recognize various literary and rhetorical devices. Students often have prior experience with rhetorical and literary devices through popular culture, but don't know the formal names for them.

The powerful utility of students' prior knowledge was vividly illustrated by students at an underachieving urban high school who developed a strong mastery of literary analysis and reasoning techniques. The key was a culturally responsive scaffolding technique called cultural modeling, developed by Carol D. Lee, a professor of learning sciences and African-American studies at Northwestern University (Lee, 2007). Lee's project designed a curriculum for the students' English language arts classes that focused on thinking strategies and habits of mind that are key to literary analysis, and which are quite similar to the higher-order strategies built into the Common Core.

Students started by using these thinking strategies on various popular texts with which they were already familiar: film, television, music, and oral traditions. As they examined and identified literary devices such as satire or symbolism in the everyday examples they encountered, students readily demonstrated sophisticated and nuanced abilities to apply literary analysis strategies. The teacher, acting as mediator, helped students recognize these same media devices in written texts.

Students then read complex texts that were unfamiliar to them, but featured social codes and contexts familiar to them. For example, these classes of African-American students read and analyzed *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. After successfully applying the same literary analysis strategies to such texts, the students proceeded to confidently apply these strategies to texts that portrayed social worlds much less familiar to them. By the end of the project, they were masterfully analyzing texts by Dante and Shakespeare.

The bigger picture

The importance of clarifying the role of prior knowledge in reading goes beyond identifying useful teaching strategies. Understanding the importance of students' prior knowledge is essential to strengthening students' overall relationship to academic learning.

Simply put, it matters how we think and talk about the role of students' experience in learning. If the misinterpretation of the Common Core guidance among principals, coaches, curriculum specialists, and others is allowed to ossify, and teachers internalize the idea that students' prior knowledge doesn't count, students themselves will get the same message loud and clear.

The Common Core does not ban prior knowledge.

Students living in poverty and students in underserved racial groups already receive so many messages that academic success is not for them. If they come to believe that academic learning has no connection to their lives, then learning will become less relevant and interesting, with a corresponding loss of motivation to do the hard work of mastering challenging skills (Pearson, Cervetti, & Tilson, 2008).

To obliterate any remaining doubt: As a careful read of the Publisher's Criteria discloses, the Common Core does not ban prior knowledge. On the contrary, both the literature on the learning process and the rigor of the Common Core highlight the importance of existing knowledge in creating new knowledge.

If education is a construction project — a structure being built piece by piece as we help students learn new things and fit them together — then the foundation of student knowledge underneath holds it all up. **K**

References

Bransford, J.D., Brown, A.L., & Cocking, R.R. (Eds.). (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Research Council.

Coleman, D. & Pimentel, S. (2012). *Revised publishers' criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and literacy, grades 3-12*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers.

Lee, C.D. (2007). *Culture, literacy, and learning: Taking bloom in the midst of the whirlwind*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Pearson, D.P., Cervetti, G.N., & Tilson, J.L. (2008). Reading for understanding. *Powerful learning: What we know about teaching for understanding*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Tatum, A. (2009). *Reading for their life: (Re)building the textual lineages of African-American adolescent males*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Willingham, D. (2009). *Why don't students like school: A cognitive scientist answers questions about how the mind works*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

U.S. Postal Service

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685

1. Publication Title: *Phi Delta Kappan*.
2. Publication No. 0031-7217.
3. Date of Filing: 10-1-12.
4. Frequency of Issue: 8 times: Sept., Oct, Nov., Dec./Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr., May.
5. No. of Issues Published Annually: 8.
6. Annual Subscription Price: \$95 institutional, \$249 print + IP Access.
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 320 W. 8th Street Suite 216, P.O. Box 7888, Bloomington, IN 47407-7888.
8. Complete Mailing Address of the Headquarters or General Business Office of the Publisher: 320 W. 8th Street Suite 216, P.O. Box 7888, Bloomington, IN 47407-7888.
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor — Publisher: Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., 320 W. 8th Street Suite 216, P.O. Box 7888, Bloomington, IN 47407-7888; Editor: Joan Richardson, 320 W. 8th Street Suite 216, P.O. Box 7888, Bloomington, IN 47407-7888; Managing Editor: Gregory Patterson, 320 W. 8th Street Suite 216, P.O. Box 7888, Bloomington, IN 47407-7888.
10. Owner: Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., 320 W. 8th Street Suite 216, P.O. Box 7888, Bloomington, IN 47407-7888.
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: None.
12. Tax Status: The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding 12 months.
13. Publication Title: *Phi Delta Kappan*.
14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: September 2012 (V94 N1).

Extent and Nature of Circulation	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Mos.	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
	A. Total Number of Copies	31,501
B. Paid Circulation		
(1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541	29,068	30,063
(2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541	0	0
(3) Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS®	2,226	1,620
(4) Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail®)	27	10
C. Total Paid Distribution	31,321	31,693
D. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution		
(1) Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies included on PS Form 3541	0	0
(2) Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541	0	0
(3) Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail)	0	0
(4) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail	123	257
E. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution	123	257
F. Total Distribution	31,444	31,950
G. Copies Not Distributed	58	50
H. Total	31,501	32,000
I. Percent Paid	99.43%	99.04%

I certify that the statements made above are correct and complete.

Gijs de Leede, chief financial officer 10/1/2012