

Folger SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY

EDUCATION

DECLARATION ON COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

or

“Do these standards have anything to do with a prestigious rare book library?”

“You bet.”

THE PROLOGUE.

What are some things we know about the Common Core State Standards?

- They are the subject of wildly diverse political, philosophical, and educational opinions and debate—in the 45 states, four territories, District of Columbia, and Department of Defense schools where they have been adopted, and in the five states where they have not been adopted.
- They were devised as a rigorous pathway to college readiness, to ensure that American high school graduates would arrive at college well prepared and ready for college level work.
- Common Core State Standards make plain the specific kinds of ELA skills that students need to develop—grade by grade from K through 12—in order to be ready for college level work.
- Common Core Standards in the English Language Arts do not confine the responsibility for student literacy—reading proficiency—to the English teacher but distribute that responsibility among all teachers.
- One element of Common Core adoption is a series of standardized assessment tests created specifically to measure progress on Common Core skills.
- For dozens of reasons, some people love them, and some hate them.

What’s going on in schools and school districts as a result of Common Core adoption?

- The Common Core has raised the required level of rigor and precision in student learning.
- With renewed (and sometimes desperate) urgency, states, school districts, schools, and teachers are seeking deep, appropriate content and successful methodologies that put students inside complex texts and provide them with tools to navigate these texts competently and meaningfully.

- In order to ensure that students will achieve the necessary levels of rigor, many teachers are finding that they must teach more self-consciously, or more thoughtfully, or differently, or all of those.

THE PLAY.

What do Common Core Standards have to do with the Folger Shakespeare Library? Do we have an opinion about them?

- For 30 years, Folger Education has believed deeply that teachers do the most important work on earth. We work hard in the service of teachers, and by extension, their students. And we have always believed it is the job of this institution to provide content knowledge, strategies, tools, and whatever else we can to support teachers' work.
- For years, we have worked with teachers on methods that connect students clearly and irrevocably with Shakespeare's language, and that give students ways to work through his plays with increasing independence. The Folger approach to teaching literature led right to Common Core outcomes long before there was a Common Core.
- This moment is about deep learning for both teachers and their students, about raising standards for students and providing excellent professional development for teachers, and so are we.

THE REALITY CHECK.

Even though we felt that approaching texts the way we do is useful to schools and teachers working with the Common Core, we didn't want to trust our own view. We needed a more informed opinion and a broader perspective to help us answer these two questions:

- 1. What *exactly* are the aspects of the Folger's education philosophy and classroom practice that align most closely with the Common Core?**
- 2. How do we know that the great student results that occur when teachers use Folger Education materials and strategies will actually help students master the skills outlined in the Common Core?**

Because we wanted objective and unvarnished answers to these questions, we asked the Insight Education Group to do a reality check, to drill down and closely examine our work. We sought out Insight because their staff has conducted a thorough study of the Standards themselves, and because they are working extensively with lots of school districts to support their CCSS implementation.

THE SEVEN DISCOVERIES.

Folger Education advances the work of teachers and students toward Common Core goals in these key areas:

1. CLOSE READING

“ . . . [A] pedagogy focused only on ‘higher-order’ or ‘critical’ thinking was insufficient to ensure that students were ready for college and career: what students could read, in terms of its complexity, was at least as important as what they could do with what they read.”¹

The Folger approach asks students to do both—think critically and interact with complex texts. We focus on the development of lively, appropriate, energizing close reading skills that bring teachers and students directly into the language and text structure of the plays. We give teachers ways to get students right into the text, actively and joyfully wrestling with complexity and rigor immediately.

☞ **Example:** Students speak and listen to single words, then phrases, then lines and speeches, and make immediate connection with the language and the plays. They hurl Shakespearean insults and compliments at one another. They call out lines while stamping out the iambic beat. In the process, they begin to figure out word meanings, line meanings, speeches, characterization—on their own, contextually.

The Teaching Shakespeare taxonomy, the curriculum material used in professional development workshops and evident in the *Shakespeare Set Free* series and online, delineates many ways to successfully engage students and lead them to confident understanding.

2. CITING EVIDENCE FROM THE TEXT

“The Common Core emphasizes using evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information. Rather than asking students questions they can answer solely from their prior knowledge and experience, the standards call for students to answer questions that depend on their having read the texts with care.”²

All of the Folger’s close reading and performance strategies demand that students use text-based evidence when building arguments, making claims, or explaining thinking. This is paramount to the Common Core. *Three-Dimensional Shakespeare*—a methodology described and demonstrated in all Folger materials and activities—focuses entirely on bringing students into close reading while acting out a scene, and in making observations and opinions about what they read *based solely on the text*.

¹ Authors: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers Title: Common Core State Standards , Appendix A. Publisher: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C. Copyright Date: 2010.

² Authors: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers Title: Common Core State Standards , Appendix A. Publisher: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C. Copyright Date: 2010.

☞ **Example:** After reading the first mechanicals scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act 1, scene 2) or the killing of Cinna the poet in *Julius Caesar* (Act 3, scene 3), students are able to answer all kinds of questions about character, motivation, plot, vocabulary, and more, solely by examining the text collaboratively, and by appropriately citing the text.

3. GROWING SCHOLARLY KNOWLEDGE IN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

“Students must be immersed in information about the world around them if they are to develop the strong general knowledge and vocabulary they need to become successful readers and be prepared for college, career, and life.”³

Central to the Common Core is moving from a broad understanding of disciplines to building and mastering deep knowledge in a discipline. Home to the world’s largest and finest collection of materials pertaining to Shakespeare and the Renaissance, the Folger is central to Shakespeare scholarship the world over. Our educational approach is deeply grounded in this content area, and the work created by our teachers and students includes scholars, scholarship, and primary source documents. All of these revive and deepen teachers’ content knowledge by offering new ways to look at old plays. Teachers then model that scholarly knowledge by using academic language, appropriate background information and scholarly materials with their students. They do not shy away from high-level, discipline-specific questions and conversations with students, and often they set out to find possible answers together.

☞ **Example:** Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1587) was Shakespeare’s primary reference work for *Macbeth*. Students who read Holinshed’s account of Macbeth and the weird sisters and compare it with Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* will discover how, for his play, Shakespeare transformed the weird sisters into ugly, androgynous hags with a distinctly more sinister role. Then students can read passages from Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) which contains a description of witches that perhaps influenced the creation of Shakespeare’s very dramatic ones. Students are forced to make real discoveries about the role of sources.

☞ **Example:** At our Teaching Shakespeare Institute, classroom teachers spend four weeks conducting sustained research in the Folger collection. With the help of resident scholars, they engage in a rigorous process—beginning with a highly focused question and ending in a project that integrates relevant information from our print and digital collections. Teachers gain ownership of new content. More importantly, they draw on this experience in their classrooms when they demonstrate how to ask great questions, find and evaluate sources, and practice the conventions of academic discourse. With teachers as models, students learn how to enter the ongoing conversation of ideas.

³ Authors: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers Title: Common Core State Standards , Appendix A. Publisher: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C. Copyright Date: 2010.

4. GROWING PRECISE CONTENT KNOWLEDGE IN STUDENTS

“The amount of ‘clutter’ created by covering too many topics...must be kept small. Therefore, the internationally benchmarked common core of standards should not be seen as an addition to existing standards, but rather the foundation for states to establish rigorous standards that also are fewer and clearer.”⁴

Precision, accuracy, and relevance are over-arching themes throughout the Common Core and are equally emphasized throughout Folger education work. Tangential facts about Shakespeare’s life – *In what year was Shakespeare born? How many children did he have?* – are unnecessary to reading closely and developing a deep understanding of Shakespeare’s works. However, providing accurate and precisely relevant background knowledge is emphasized with all educators who work with the Folger or use their curricula.

☞ **Example:** Students who examine a digitized version of a 17th-century broadside expand their precise knowledge of the period. Students who learn about the number and range of choices that were made by all kinds of people as Shakespeare’s plays first made their way into print—the very new world of movable type, the Stationers’ Company, typesetters who “improved” the text, others who were forced to make choices in order to fit the play to the page—these students have specific knowledge about the instability of Shakespeare’s text. This is an important foundation for understanding an entirely new dimension of interpretation as well as the first step in being able to understand speeches and scenes that differ significantly in folio and quarto versions.

The focus on precise and relevant background knowledge like this also provides teachers with the opportunity to make powerful and lasting interdisciplinary connections that can only enhance students’ understanding of the text, and keep their knowledge base growing.

5. STUDENT-DIRECTED AND STUDENT-LED PERFORMANCES OF SHAKESPEARE’S TEXTS CREATE INDEPENDENT, SELF-DETERMINED LEARNERS

“Furthermore, students in college are expected to read complex texts with substantially greater independence (i.e., much less scaffolding) than are students in typical K–12 programs. College students are held more accountable for what they read on their own than are most students in high school (Erickson & Strommer, 1991; Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007).”⁵

⁴ Authors: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers Title: Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive World-Class Education. Publisher: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C. Copyright Date: 2010.

⁵ Authors: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers Title: Common Core State Standards , Appendix A. Publisher: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C. Copyright Date: 2010.

Folger methodology speaks directly to the fundamental change that the Common Core demands—the role of the teacher shifts that of a direct instructor to a facilitator of student knowledge. Performance-based learning and teaching are strategies concerned with students *doing* Shakespeare—actively making it real. They have nothing to do with acting talent, but rather allow students to approach the plays both as scholars and actors. These strategies ensure that, with the guidance of a committed teacher, students take control of their learning and demonstrate their understanding through scene work and performance. In this context, students can also demonstrate their mastery of the content in other ways: they edit the text and make smart decisions about textual variations, for example, or they create a prompt book that makes note of the tone of the speakers, pauses in the dialogue, and movement on the stage. These authentic tasks deepen students’ knowledge and provide opportunities for all students—including English Language Learners, students with Individualized Education Programs, and reluctant readers—to demonstrate what they know and are able to do.

The performance process itself aligns with many other parts of the Common Core. Besides navigating through the plays, performance helps students develop personal grit, persistence and confidence. And the public speaking skills acquired through performance directly align with the Common Core speaking and listening standards.

6. STUDENT-DIRECTED AND STUDENT-LED PERFORMANCES OF COMPLEX TEXTS WRITTEN BY OTHER AUTHORS CREATE INDEPENDENT, SELF-DETERMINED LEARNERS

The Folger approach is transferrable to other authors, and to fiction, non-fiction, other drama, and poetry. Many, many teachers attest to its success in enabling students to both investigate and navigate Dickens, Fitzgerald, Wilson, Twain, Steinbeck, Hurston, Hemingway, Lee, and more.

7. ALL STUDENTS CAN AND SHOULD ACCESS SHAKESPEARE

“...The problems with reading achievement are not ‘equal opportunity’ in their effects: students arriving at school from less-educated families are disproportionately represented in many of these statistics (Bettinger & Long, 2009.) The consequences of insufficiently high text demands and a lack of accountability for independent reading of complex texts in K-12 schooling are severe for everyone, but they are disproportionately so for those who are already most isolated from text before arriving at the schoolhouse door.”⁶

Shakespeare wrote for all classes and kinds of people, and probably half of his audience at the Globe couldn’t read. Folger Education has *always* known that Shakespeare is for all students and teachers. All students should have access to the rigorous texts and deep ideas in Shakespeare’s works. For 30 years, we have seen that, with the right kind of teaching, all students can understand these works. Any teacher can teach Shakespeare and any student

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can learn Shakespeare. We not only believe this deeply but know it to be true because we have seen it happen over and over.

EPILOGUE.

This brings us full circle to what we have always believed—and taught—at the Folger:

- Elements of performance process are wildly effective tools that open up a world of language, textual understanding, and practice.
- All of these strategies and skills transfer seamlessly to other complex texts.
- Big questions are worth asking, and great teachers model approaches to investigating their answers.
- Deep content knowledge is more important than broad and thin content knowledge.
- Close reading, rigor and persistence are good things for students – and for teachers too.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peggy O'Brien".

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