

One to Grow On

Teaching Like a Four-Star Chef

Standards are ingredients for a good curriculum, but they are not a recipe.

How do you feel about the new Common Core standards?" is the question I'm asked most often these days. Here's what I think.

I have a number of teacher heroes who've lifted my understanding of the art of our profession. More to the point, they have lifted the lives and prospects of the hundreds of students they've taught. Some of these teachers have the ability to help students know they are valuable and capable; others have a profound capacity to help students identify their purpose in life. Two of my heroes—Steven Levy and John Hunter—have consistently done both those things and have also revealed the many gifts of learning to countless young people.

Steering by Students' Enthusiasms

Steven Levy looked for what he called "the genius" of the content he taught and set out to connect it with the genius in each learner entrusted to him. He crafted a new curriculum each year—from scratch. One year, his students studied a bike path in their community as a way to learn math, science, social studies, writing, music, and art—and to appreciate the complexity and uniqueness of their New England town. Another year, nearly everything in the curriculum centered on the journey of the Pilgrims to the shores of the New World and on how they made a life there.

His students would tell you that their year with Mr. Levy was alive, dynamic, demanding, and fresh. Time went quickly, and they were transformed as learners and human beings by what they studied and how they studied it. Steven believed strongly that he could create curriculums that would simultaneously

let students explore their world and meet the school district's expectations for content knowledge. He called what he was doing "steering the enthusiasms of the students toward the shore of the required curriculum."

Teaching 4th Graders the World

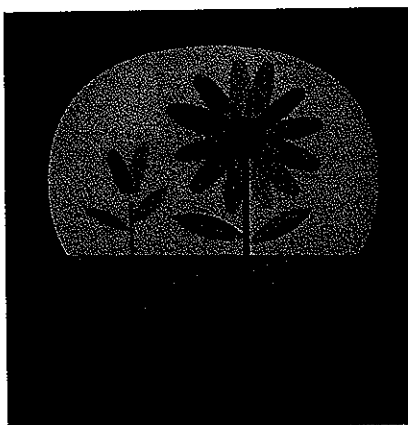
John Hunter developed the World Peace Game in which his 4th graders encountered the complexities and possibilities in their world and in themselves. In the World Peace Game, students represent various countries on the verge of war. They must study and take into account realities

of economics, geography, culture, government, meteorology, natural resources, and other elements while choosing actions their countries will take in response to various scenarios and interconnected dilemmas John presents to his students.

The game may last a month—or three. It takes place around a four-level, Plexiglas board filled with game pieces representing various conditions of their

world, from undersea exploration to the stock market to hunger. To achieve their joint goal of avoiding armed conflict, students must collaborate and engage in complex thinking and problem solving. They learn to understand and appreciate varied perspectives on an event and to be empathetic with those whose views and needs differ from their own. They have to put aside the inclination to argue or stomp off; they learn to persist in the face of daunting odds.

John says the World Peace Game gives students a way to explore the world and discover their own realities. Thus they learn content 4th graders need to know—and more than any set of textbooks has ever contained. And they are enlivened, enriched, and extended as people.



Carol Ann Tomlinson (cat3y@virginia.edu) is William Clay Parrish Jr. Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership, Foundation, and Policy at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia in Charlottesville. She is the author, with Marcia B. Imbeau, of *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom* (ASCD, 2010).

Steven Levy, John Hunter, and teachers like them function from the premise that to learn is to become more fully human and that curriculum should be a catalyst for that kind of learning. These two educators understand the potential benefits of standards. They also understand that standards can be one ingredient in a powerful curriculum, but they should never *become* the curriculum.

Dinner—or Ingredients?

If I laid out on my kitchen counter raw hamburger meat still in its Styrofoam container, cans of tomatoes and beans, jars of spices, an onion, and a bulb of garlic, and invited my friends to have dinner by chowing down from one end of the counter to the other, my invitation would be stunningly easy to decline! Further, thereafter, my friends would take care to avoid my kitchen when they were hungry. My error would be that I confused ingredients for dinner with dinner itself.

Not only do Steven and John understand the difference between ingredients and dinner, they understand that one can make many different dishes with the same ingredients, by changing proportions, adding new ingredients, using the same ingredients in different ways, and so on. In their careers, they've developed the art of making elegant dinners that incorporate, but are not limited to, prescribed ingredients.

Jay McTighe uses an architectural analogy. He speaks of standards as building codes. For a variety of reasons, it's unacceptable to ignore the building codes. Great architects and engineers follow these codes but don't let them limit their capacity to build a wide range of compelling, functional structures that both attend to human needs and expand human possibilities.

So here's what I think about the new Common Core standards. They are ingredients for curriculum—better ingredients than many we've had in the past. But they are not dinner. They are

contemporary building codes—better suited to the 21st century than many previous sets of building codes. But they're not the buildings.

It is quite possible for us as teachers to simply “cover” the Common Core standards as though they were our curriculum. To do so would be to confuse ingredients with dinner, or building codes with architectural design—and woefully shortchange our students. It's also quite possible for us to work toward becoming the equivalent of four-star chefs or architects who reinvent the cityscape—and to dignify our students and their prospects.

What I really think about the new Common Core State Standards is that the decision we make about their role in curriculum is mighty important! **EL**

Author's note: To learn more about Steven Levy's approach to curriculum development, see his book *Starting From Scratch: One Classroom Builds Its Own Curriculum* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann). To learn more about John Hunter's work, see www.worldpeacegame.org.

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