

On Tuesday Morning: The Case for Standards for the English Language Arts

James M. Brewbaker

The author argues that the Standards document gives English teachers direction they did not previously have.

Tuesday morning in mid-January. American English teachers, thousands of them, are teaching Shakespeare.

This Tuesday morning, close to 50 million children and adolescents attend one of better than 100,000 American public, private, or church-related schools. Nearly four million teachers work in them. In the public schools, close to three-fourths of students and three of five teachers take their places in the elementary through middle grades, a majority of them responsible for helping children learn native-language skills. In secondary schools, perhaps one in six teachers—more than 150,000—teach English. That's a lot of English teachers, more than 35,000 each for the four high school years (U.S. Department of Education, 1993–94).

Overwhelmingly, visitors to an American school this morning would see young people studying reading, language arts, or English. Many elementary schools break things down further into separate topics, time slots, and lines to be filled on report cards labeled spelling, reading, and language arts. Millions of elementary children have basal readers and workbooks open on their desks; other millions read, write about, and share with classmates books they have selected from picture books, stories, chapter books, and nonfiction titles their teacher provides.

In the high schools, almost everyone takes English, which, with the exception in some states of an interlude in the 1960s and 1970s, has been numbered I, II, III, and IV as long as anyone can remember. There are observable traditions, rituals almost, in this practice. Few suffer from the illusion that I, II, III, and IV are sequential. They just *are*. Mention grade 11 to English teachers in Idaho, Orlando, or Chicago, and visions of American literature from really old to not-so-recent begin to dance. Mention grade 10,

and English teachers' minds turn *en mass* toward genre study (*the novel, the short story, the drama*) and, along with it, *Julius Caesar*.

FOUR TEACHERS AND JULIUS CAESAR

Narrow your mind's eye to consider those 35,000 tenth-grade English teachers, at some point teaching Shakespeare during the school year, with *Julius Caesar* the most frequently anthologized and hence most often taught. What would you see in those Shakespeare classes, whether the *drama du jour* is *Julius Caesar, Romeo and Juliet* or, rarely, another selection? What good is all that Shakespeare study? What is "teaching Shakespeare," anyway?

At a school not far from you, Ms. Smith's *Julius Caesar* classes seem closer to history than literature study. Mindy Smith's kids learn about the Roman Empire, its Republic and triumvirate, the tension between the commoners in the streets and their leaders, and Roman superstitions. Then they learn about Shakespeare himself, what is known of his life, and they learn of the Elizabethan World, its peculiar set of superstitions, details about the Globe Theater and play production in London, plus other tidbits. Eventually, they get to the play.

Down the hall from Mindy Smith's classroom, Mr. Wang also teaches *Julius Caesar*. Taking a different tack, David Wang side-steps history, focusing instead on literary criticism and terminology. His students learn about the soliloquy and its function in characterization, the classical unities of drama, the nature of tragedy, and how comic characters and Elizabethan wit play a part in a serious play. They learn about irony: *Is, as Mark Anthony says, Brutus really an honorable man, the noblest Roman of them all?*

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Crosstown, Mrs. Carter's tenth graders are also studying *Julius Caesar*. She approaches the task thematically. "Power and Leaders" is the subject, and Bonita Carter uses *Julius Caesar* rather than teaches it, focusing on key scenes while summarizing or showing a video of the rest of the play. Students read and compare the speeches of Brutus and Mark Antony to those of Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Golda Meir. To build an operational definition of *leader*, they read contemporary and YA fiction searching for qualities of leadership and the ways in which power affects men and women for good or evil. They collect and share news clippings about Presidential politics, and Bonita shows video segments from *This Week With David Brinkley* featuring contemporary politicians—Bill Clinton, Bob Dole, Al Gore, Newt Gingrich, Colin Powell, and others.

In the rural county north of where Bonita Carter teaches her "Power and Leaders" unit—only a forty-minute drive, in fact, from Mindy Smith's and David Wang's school in the eastern suburbs—another English teacher, Ms. DeAngelo, also teaches *Julius Caesar*. Lucy DeAngelo loves drama, whether Shakespeare, August Wilson, or Wendy Wasserstein. Her students, reluctant at first, then receptive to the point of semi-to-genuine enthusiasm, practice scenes from Shakespeare to present before children at a nearby elementary school: the assassination scene and Caesar's funeral from *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*'s witches, fights between Capulets and Montagues, comic scenes from *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and others. Lucy DeAngelo's classes meet in the auditorium this week, and it takes a sophisticated eye to see that, in the midst of apparent chaos, the kids are pulling it together.

Yes, along with Mindy Smith and David Wang, there are thousands of Bonita Carters, thousands of Lucy DeAngelos, teaching English, teaching Shakespeare, on Tuesday morning.

Four tenth-grade English classrooms, four qualified, knowledgeable educators teaching Shakespeare, four radically different perspectives on what *teaching English*, a deceptively complicated two-word phrase, means.

WHAT DOES *TEACHING ENGLISH* MEAN?

Until recently, the profession had too few tools to help understand what happens in English and language arts classrooms, whether on Tuesday morning in January or Friday afternoon in May, whether second grade or fifth, whether spelling rules or soliloquies. And, if understanding *teaching English* has been difficult, evaluating English curriculum and teaching well enough to decide what it should look like in Arizona, New Hampshire, and South Carolina, what its essential qualities should be, has been even more difficult.

Until recently. Now, with the publication of *Standards for the English Language Arts (SELA)* by NCTE and IRA earlier this year, that has changed (NCTE 1996). Now, in a document more evolutionary than revolutionary, NCTE and IRA set forth in general yet easily applicable terms what should occur in all English language arts classrooms. As such, thoughtful teachers, curriculum planners, anthologists, and teacher educators now have a framework on which to base their work for the coming decade, and well into the next millennium.

Four years in development, touched in one way or another by literally thousands of classroom teachers, curriculum specialists, and university professors, hammered out in final form in what must have felt like the umpteenth meeting between NCTE and IRA leaders, *SELA* was greeted by no better than mixed reviews in the media. Some critics literally took it apart. They complained of the document's abstractness (the fact that, among other presumed flaws, *Standards* omits such particulars as "fourth-grade children will distinguish between *their*, *there*, and *they're*"), and, gleefully in some instances, they lambasted what they saw as the document's overreliance on jargon (e.g., *writing process elements*, *literacy communities*, and *print and non-print texts*) rather than plain English.

In the words of *U.S. News & World Report*'s John Leo, "Bad prose hides bad thinking" (1996, 61). Leo went on to skewer the *Standards*' child-centeredness and cultural relativism, revealing that he had at least read and thought about the document rather than dashing off a column based on the summary version. Other critics were not only less knowledgeable about the docu-

ment, they also displayed a failure to grasp even its most elemental qualities.

Among NCTE members, *SELA* also had mixed reviews. “All fluff and no stuff,” complained Rebecca Duckro (1996) of Bowling Green University on NCTE-Talk, the organization’s e-mail bulletin board. In her view, the absence of benchmark achievement standards for writing mechanics, the failure to address and set standards for basic concepts derived, for example, from grammar (e.g., knowledge of *participle*, *collective noun*, *clause*) and criticism (*local color*, *falling action*, *connotation*) renders the *Standards* pointless. Other members, Louann Reid (1996) among them, defended the generality of the document, pointing out that “the guidelines allow districts to set their own proficiencies in the ways that . . . best meet the needs of their communities.”

LOOKING AT SELA

At Columbus State University (Georgia) this past summer, I and ten graduate students were immersed in *SELA*. The class included primary, middle, and high school teachers; one taught moderate-to-severely impaired children in grades 7–8. For students in this intense advanced course (Curriculum Studies: English Language Arts K–12), the new *Standards* were the centerpiece of their inquiry.

Except for the authors/editors of the document itself, these ten public and private school teachers probably both understand and know better what to do with the *Standards* than any comparable group of educators anywhere. They gained personal insight through writing and publishing (in-house) *Standards*-based vignettes, 350–600 word scenes illustrating the teacher-writer’s best classroom practice. They applied the *Standards* more broadly by using the document to draft an instrument for evaluating either an English curriculum or language arts instruction. And they reflected on how the *Standards* can help English teachers differentiate, on the one hand, between instruction consistent with reasonable norms regarding what all children and adolescents should experience at school, and English teaching that is, in contrast, deficient, out of step with well thought out professional expectations for enlightened teaching practice.

To a man or woman, I and these teachers became enthusiasts for *SELA*. What they

learned, what we learned together, convinced us that English language arts professionals everywhere should embrace the *Standards* as the most appropriate foundation for designing, evaluating, and improving English language arts programs now and well into the next century. We concluded that the *Standards* will, if understood and adopted widely, positively affect emerging state and local standards, curriculum design, publishers, and teacher education (see **Note**). We recognized that they will provide leverage when we need to make an authoritative case against the mindless and superficial in the language arts curriculum. Most significantly, the *Standards* will cause teachers, individually or in departments and school systems, to reexamine their practice and change it for the better.

What we left “Curriculum Studies: English Language Arts K–12” with this summer may be boiled down to several major ideas about the *Standards*, both what they are and what they are not. If every *English Journal* reader understood these ideas, professional ownership of the document and the concepts it embodies would follow.

First, we came to understand what *SELA* is not.

***SELA* Is Not a Prescriptive List of Measurement Items**

Nor was it intended to be, and for good reasons.

The movement to create national standards was sparked by the Six National Goals for Education formulated in 1990 by the nation’s governors, then embraced by both the Bush and Clinton administrations. Under President Bill Clinton, the original list was expanded into *Goals 2000*. Among *Goals 2000* is this: “By the year 2000, American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, math, science, arts, foreign languages, history and geography, civics and government, and economics” (Council of Chief State School Officers 1994). This is the first time I can recall English at the head of such a laundry list. Be that as it may, widespread efforts to define “challenging subject matter” started soon thereafter. Spurring this effort was the U.S. Office of Education, which, favorably impressed by standards adopted in 1989 by the National Council of Teachers of

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Mathematics (NCTM), funded an array of standards-planning projects, including the joint project of NCTE and IRA.

For reasons which should have been but weren't pretty obvious, the marriage between the federal government and NCTE and IRA's standards project soured quickly. It ended abruptly in 1994. By then, it was clear that NCTE and IRA, rather than spelling out "challenging subject matter" in the detailed form that would provide a ready basis for test development, were going their own way with defining standards, working instead toward formulating the eight, ten, or twelve essential qualities of best practice among English language arts professionals. Given the organizations' roles in helping teachers recognize the complexity of language learning, especially its developmental nature, given their pioneering of holistic and/or alternative assessment practices such as portfolios, it only followed that the federal government would reject early drafts of English language arts standards. Soon, each side had dug in its heels; the swift, inevitable outcome was divorce, the withdrawal of governmental funding.

Supported between 1994 and 1996 directly by NCTE and IRA, published in March, 1996, *Standards for the English Language Arts* was the last of the major standards documents to be published. Though not what the federal government wanted, it remained true to the concept of national standards, properly fleshed out by state and local communities. At the same time, it was also consistent with research on language learning, with current best practice, and with emerging knowledge of measurement.

Thus, those looking for benchmarks (i.e., test items) to apply to every tenth-grader studying Shakespeare on a Tuesday morning in January or at the end of the school year won't find them. That wasn't the idea. But their absence is a strength of the *Standards*, not a drawback.

SELA Is Not a Cookbook for Skillful English Teaching

Following receipt of the *Standards* in capsule form, some English teachers wondered, "Where's the beef?" By now, many who complained in April have read the full text. They have found the meat of the document to be 70 pages of protein plus appendices. They have read and grasped material

in two introductory chapters (one outlining the need and process for developing the Standards, the second detailing their theoretical basis), the twelve Standards themselves in elaborated form, and vignettes illustrating how the Standards may work in elementary, middle school, and high school classrooms. They've referred, as needed, to a useful glossary.

Even so, even considering the skeletal Standards in fleshed-out form, they do not at first glance tell teachers, "Do this on Tuesday morning." "Do this when you teach Shakespeare, and *never* do that." Nor should they. Framers of *SELA*, it became obvious to Columbus State graduate students in July, both respected English language arts teachers more and expected more *from* them than to turn the document into a cookbook. They expected teachers to take a large idea such as that embodied in Standard 11—*Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities*—and to translate it, apply it, and use it to improve their practice, their department, their local curriculum.

What, teachers should ask, is a "language community"? What good is a language community, educationally speaking? What language communities exist in our school—in my classroom or elsewhere—and what other language communities do my students participate in? Are families language communities? Churches? E-mail bulletin boards? How can I and others in our school foster creation of new language communities? How can I enable students, all students, to take part in these language communities? How might technology be a source of new language communities for my students? Am I doing anything that hinders their productive participation in language communities?

The answers to these questions are neither easy nor obvious. But we didn't end up as English teachers because we rely on quick and dirty solutions to complex issues and problems. The profession demands more of us than that. So do the *Standards*.

HOW CAN WE USE THE STANDARDS?

If the *Standards* are neither a compendium of test items nor a cookbook, what are they? How can they be used? How are they a step forward in the process of helping 35,000 tenth-grade teachers on Tuesday

mornings when they “teach Shakespeare”? These are the key features that Columbus State graduate students came to believe were the essence of the document.

SELA Is a Statement of Principles of, for, and by Professionals

A profession has its own specialized knowledge, its own terminology. Well-educated literacy teachers glide past such terms as “writing process elements” without a pause. Regrettably, journalists find the same phrases peculiar, even symptomatic of poor thinking. But all professionals—accountants, surgeons, even journalists—have their specialized terminology. So it is with teachers. So it is with the Standards.

Print and non-print texts, the phrase which jumps out of Standard 1 (“Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world”), demands fresh thinking of both professional and lay readers. Authors of *SELA* needed to make clear the principle that *reading* means far more than translating letters and words into speech, and that what one reads ranges from Shakespeare to stock quotations, “60 Minutes,” radio’s Sports Babe, and beyond.

Sadly, the flood of negativity which greeted the release of the *Standards* speaks loudly of the low esteem Americans feel toward their teachers. I believe it says less about the language of the document itself. Were the *Standards* published by the *New England Journal of Medicine*, were their focus the essential qualities for educating family practitioners, the media would have refrained from the sort of mockery they laid on the language of *SELA*.

In an *Education Week* interview, NCTE Executive Director Miles Myers observed, “We are not claiming we have public language here” (Diegmuller 1996). In retrospect, one might well wish that NCTE and IRA had pitched the Standards more skillfully to the media, but this does not alter Myers’ basic point: *SELA*, having been paid for by educators, was written by educators for an audience of educators.

SELA Is Like a Political Platform

SELA is big enough to provide direction to teachers from different levels, to teachers dealing with different local school or com-

munity circumstances, and to teachers with different points of view. Some would count this quality as a flaw. Imagine, though, the daunting task of determining what fourth-, eighth-, and eleventh-grade children and adolescents should study, what works of literature they should read, what processes they should engage in, and how their teachers should help them become skillful users of the language. Consider as well two organizations, NCTE and IRA, historic rivals, the former with its historic ties to elementary education and literacy in the most basic sense, the latter with its ties to university departments of English, to Western Civ, to culture of a traditional sort. Finally, consider those among the various panels writing, reviewing, and revising the Standards with platforms of their own, with contrasting points of view on issues and topics that divide English language arts teachers. Some of these include: multiculturalism, the literary canon, feminist criticism, media study, the best uses for technology in language arts, bilingual education, basals vs. literature-based reading and writing instruction, middle school vs. junior high, and so on.

Taking into account the mosaic of traditions, constituencies, and purposes that the *SELA* authors brought with them to the table, the fact that the document was written at all is remarkable. That they were simultaneously able to avoid taking sides on divisive issues while centering the English language arts on students and the processes by which they learn and *learn with* language is a singular achievement.

A microcosm of sorts, my graduate class this summer included some teachers ready to toss out the literary canon as we know it, but others who had comfortably taught British lit from *Beowulf* to D. H. Lawrence for decades. The *Standards*, we found, allow for both perspectives while establishing student purpose and meaning-making as the foundation for all English teaching. They also provide a catalyst for nudging teachers toward greater student-centeredness.

For example, Standard 2 states in part, “Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.” Does this language allow for literature study fo-

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cusing on themes and contemporary works? Yes, of course it does, though teachers who narrow their students' literature menu to popular fiction, film, and teledrama of the past decade probably don't meet the "wide range" test. On the other hand, does this language accommodate literature programs that make primary use of classic works and writers? Yes, as long as teachers make room for quality contemporary as well as traditional works, as long as they move beyond literary history and criticism to help students grasp human dimensions of traditional selections. This applies equally well to a developmental reading lesson in third grade and to tenth-grade *Julius Caesar*.

The Standards, though, are interdependent, not to be applied piecemeal. Others must always be taken into account. Standard 12, for example, reads: "Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish *their own purposes* (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion and the exchange of information)" (*italics added*). How are student purposes honored, taken seriously, in English classrooms? Is an emphasis on the contemporary (literature, rap music, popular culture, the World Wide Web) and here-and-now adolescent needs (for selecting a path to follow after high school, for developing values, for academic success, for refining interpersonal skills, for deciding whether to watch *ER*, *MTV*, or *48 Hours*) sufficient evidence that student purposes matter in an English classroom? Tentatively, yes. Does traditional teaching preclude students from "accomplishing their own purposes"? Sometimes. But not necessarily. Skillful teachers have always found ways to link student purpose with the curriculum.

Strong English teaching, whether traditional or innovative, is reflected in the Standards. No one is pushed out. All can use them to improve their practice.

SELA Is a K–12 Statement of Process-Centered Learning and Teaching Principles

Obvious as this may be, it is worth underscoring. Seeing "English" from a K–12 perspective is a relatively new idea. Thirty years ago, forward-thinking language educators gathered at the Anglo American Conference on Teaching English (soon to be known as the Dartmouth Conference) to re-think how we were teaching young people to read,

write, and speak (see Herbert J. Muller's *The Uses of English*, 1967, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston). Soon thereafter, the profession, spurred by James Moffett, James Britton, and Alan Purves, among others, began tearing down the invisible wall between elementary and secondary language arts education. At the time, the notion of curriculum unity across, up, and down the grades was downright radical.

Further, the Standards—once and for all, perhaps—have moved the curriculum beyond the tripod of language, literature, and composition which comprised English for most of this century. Instead, English is to be conceived as what students *do*—that is, they read and build understanding (Standards 1 and 2); they apply strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate (Standard 3); they adjust their use of spoken, written and visual language (Standard 4); they write (Standard 5); they apply knowledge of language structure and conventions (Standard 6); and so on. Mirroring the evolution of the English language arts since Dartmouth, they define the content of English as language events.

SELA Looks to the Future, Not the Present or Past

In their summer studies, Columbus State graduate students found that *SELA* is a remarkably sound blueprint for the first years of the coming century. What will those years bring? Among other trends, there will be a continuing explosion of electronic information and ways to use it; if the past decade is a guide to the next, developments in technology will be so radical as to make today's list of the newest and hottest innovations seem quaint. Second, American culture will—for all the limits placed on immigration, regardless of English-as-official-language legislation—be an increasingly diverse society, a society in which American citizens will, to succeed, see themselves as world citizens as well.

The *Standards* do more than salute these trends. With regard to technology, the document makes clear NCTE and IRA's understanding that literacy, as was true in the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth century, will differ, will demand more, in the future. This, in part, is why *text* had to be redefined as *print and non-print text*, had to be more inclusive, had to reflect the ex-

plosion of electronic information. Standard 8 states, "Students use . . . technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge." With regard to cultural diversity, the *Standards* are unambiguous: English language arts teachers must help young people understand "cultures of the United States and the world" (Standard 1), and, further, must help them understand and respect "diversity in language use, patterns and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions and social roles" (Standard 9).

CONCLUSION

When asked, "What was the most significant thing you learned this summer?," all ten students in my graduate class wrote that it was coming to know the Standards. This was not necessarily a predictable response. Most students had their first exposure to the Internet in the course, to NCTE-Talk and other lists, to a dizzying array of resources accessible through the World Wide Web. They also read and critiqued recent appealing NCTE titles detailing innovative classroom practice.

But they found the Standards most significant, most likely to affect their teaching on Tuesdays in January and at other times. Some, like Lisa, a fifth-grade teacher, felt affirmed by the document. "As I looked at *SELA*, it made me feel good that I was indeed exposing my students to good language arts activities. [Now] I plan to share them with my faculty." Debbie, who teaches moderately to severely disabled students, wrote, "My thinking about how language arts should be taught has changed, and I feel free to do things I've dreamed about but never thought were acceptable."

Tom, on the other hand, used the Standards to reflect on his classroom practice; what he saw made him uncomfortable. "I have often used methods which are not rich in the Standards," he wrote:

Being exposed to them reminds me of a coaching clinic I attended with Anson Dorrance, the great women's soccer coach. He dissuaded us from using activities containing long lines of inactive players and encouraged . . . activities which kept everyone learning. I apply this analogy to the Standards. In the future, I will try to

develop plans which incorporate several standards. This way, students will receive more opportunities to learn.

As the winter progresses, these teachers now have a number of Tuesday mornings under their belt. Many more will follow, mornings with *Julius Caesar*, with "The Road Less Traveled," with *The Color Purple*, with e-mail penpals in faraway places. Their students will learn more, experience more, do more as a result of *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Whether or not they have the same impact elsewhere—in your classroom, community, and state—is a matter of choice.

Note

In mid-July meetings, executive committees of both the Georgia Council of Teachers of English and the Georgia Council of International Reading Association formally adopted *SELA*, then conveyed their endorsement to state panels in the midst of curriculum revision.

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