Editor’s Note: As states and districts plan for the Common Core State Standards, educators are left to wonder how digital literacy fits into the standards. This Spotlight focuses on how to incorporate digital literacy, explores public-private efforts to close the digital-skills gap, and looks at some competency-based and technology-driven programs, attempting to give students a head start on common-core assessments.

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COMMENTARY

The Common Core’s Digital-Literacy Gap

By Paul Barnwell

Just the other day, I perused my district’s proposed curriculum map for sophomore English. Nothing too surprising, with plenty of mentions of textual analysis, thesis writing, and literary elements.

If it were 1990, it’d look okay. Unfortunately, the Common Core State Standards and the related ACT Quality Core standards—on which our curriculum is based—come up way short with regards to digital literacy. This leaves many educators without enough direction, and too many district curriculum maps failing to embrace essential components of literacy today. Combine these new standards with schools’ continued emphasis—for the time being, at least—on traditional pen-and-paper end-of-course assessments, and teachers are hardly in a great collective position to promote, create, and implement lesson ideas that are appropriate for 2012.

Adult literacy in 2012 means being able to synthesize information from multiple online sources to write a blog post or substantive email. It means analyzing which online tools will best serve your communications purpose. It means making smart decisions about what information is useful online, and how to curate and filter the endless stream of data coming in. It means reviewing your digital footprint...
and learning how to take some control over what information you broadcast to the world, from your tweets, profile pictures, and recommended links. While the common core addresses some of the above skills, its guidance is far too vague, especially for those teachers who are uncomfortable with new technologies.

This is not to say that traditional reading and writing skills don’t have their place. We still need to continue to teach students to sustain their attention and thought on longer texts. But we might be missing an opportunity to create greater balance between traditional literacy skills and interactive competencies with the widespread implementation of these new standards. The language of the common standards is simply not bold or specific enough when it comes to digital-literacy skills.

Leaving Too Much to Chance

Common-core Anchor Standard Number 7 for reading, for example, states that students will “Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.” The standard, while more progressive than most current standards, doesn’t specifically mention digital sources. This is problematic for teachers, who may interpret the standard in different ways. Perhaps the standards’ writers were being deliberately vague due to the ever-changing world of pedagogy and technology. But that’s leaving a lot to chance.

The informational-text reading standard for 10th grade English under Anchor 7 reads: “Analyze various accounts of the subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story told both in print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.” I can certainly come up with some lessons to address this directive, but I’m not sure they will help my students become savvy interpreters of diverse-media content. Not to mention that this standard is unlikely to be tested on a standardized test, so most of the sophomores in my school—and countless others across the country—won’t be exposed to it. It’s no surprise that this standard did not make the cut for my school’s curriculum map.

Do the common-core creators believe in a utopian world where students and teachers will magically leap from analog learning to being digitally competent? Why not use this opportunity to make a greater push to combine traditional skills with new-literacy skills? After all, as teacher and blogger Brian Kelley argues, the majority of our reading and writing “territories” now exist in a digital sphere.

“In many ways, we live every moment of our lives in a digital reality because the world is making more land—a digital landscape,” Kelley writes. “Yet instead of training educators, young and old, to engage inspiration and inventiveness, American politics burns the digital landscape right from under our feet, almost as fast as it can be created, with the oversights of the Common Core.”

It’s hard to argue with Kelley’s point. Digital-literacy skills should not be taught in isolation, but rather woven into every course. However, that isn’t the way they are presented in the common standards. And that lack of emphasis ultimately affects what teachers will be prepared to teach. In my school district, it’s easy to find professional development and trainings relating to teaching skills for the end-of-course exam. It’s not so easy to find school leaders working on the potential to expand digital-literacy instruction.

Digital Journeys

I should mention that not all English teachers share my misgivings. In a thoughtful post on his blog, for example, instructional coach Joe Wood argues that the common standards place a much-needed emphasis on digital literacy. He cites references in the standards documents to the importance of online research and the use of technological tools. But my point is that such directives are both too broad and too isolated. They don’t give teachers—or curriculum writers—enough to go on.

Wood argues that the standards raise a number of technological-competency issues that schools need to pay attention to: “Can your students make strategic decisions about when it would be most appropriate to use a blog post, video, or podcast to convey their ideas? Do they have knowledge of any of these tools? Do your teachers? Do your teachers and students have access to these types of digital texts in the form of hardware, software, and networking policies?” These are great questions—but asking them is not required by the standards. They are Wood’s own (and I think somewhat willful) interpretations. Will other educators draw the same inferences from the standards’ stray references to technology and diverse media? To judge by my own district’s curriculum map, the answer is, probably not. The push just isn’t strong enough in the common-standards documents.

As a teacher, writer, and citizen, I’m constantly considering the pros and cons of how I engage in the online world. I joined, quit, and rejoined Facebook in the past few years. I have decided to use Twitter as a curation source for ideas on education, technology, and culture. I began blogging again at Mindful Stew. These decisions that I make daily have a profound impact on how I engage in the online world, in addition to influencing how much time I spend offline.

Why not use this opportunity to make a greater push to combine traditional skills with new-literacy skills?”

I can’t speak for all educators, but I don’t feel like I’m doing my job if I don’t challenge students to think about what it means to live and work in a world of constant connectivity. Sharing my own digital journeys and decisions with my students—to get them thinking about thinking (i.e., using metacognition) in relation to technology and communication—is one way to I plan to do this, even if that sort of thing is not addressed in the common standards.

The English/language arts common standards for 10th grade reading and writing are rigorous and scaffolded from previous grades. I can’t complain there. And ultimately I believe that the common standards will challenge and elevate teaching and learning across most states.

But I will complain that, while feeling the pressure to prepare struggling readers and writers for their traditional year-end literacy-analysis test, I will have to buck the common core and our curriculum map in order to teach students skills needed for 2012 rather than 1990.

Paul Barnwell teaches English and digital media at Fern Creek Traditional High School in Louisville, Ky. In his spare time, he enjoys bow hunting, urban gardening, and rooting for the New England Patriots. You can read more of his thoughts on education, technology, and culture at Mindful Stew.
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Why Core Standards Must Embrace Media Literacy

By Richard Beach & Frank W. Baker

Today’s young people are growing up in a world full of smartphones, texting, YouTube, Internet access, and instant entertainment and information. But while they may be media-savvy, we maintain that they are not necessarily media-or digital-literate.

Multiple studies have shown that many young people lack the media and information-literacy skills they need to be competent communicators in the 21st century. Many don’t venture beyond the top result when searching online and lack the critical skills to assess the validity of online-search results and identify the sources of information from both online and other media.

“Kids and Credibility: An Empirical Examination of Youth, Digital Media Use, and Information Credibility,” a 2010 study funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, surveyed 11- to 18-year-olds and found that 89 percent believed that “some” to “a lot” of what they found on the Web was believable. They failed to challenge the ideological assumptions inherent in dramas, news broadcasts, or product and political advertising.

Throughout much of American education’s history, there have been calls for more attention to fostering media literacy—the ability to access, evaluate, produce, and critically analyze media and media messages. More recently, the sharp increase in the use of digital tools for constructing and communicating ideas using online databases, blogs, Twitter, wikis, texting, podcasts, image repositories, and digital videos has involved a completely new set of digital literacies that not all students necessarily possess.

In 1989, Ernest L. Boyer, then the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and former U.S. commissioner of education, noted: “It is no longer enough simply to read and write. Students must also become literate in the understanding of visual images. Our children must learn how to spot a stereotype, isolate a social cliché, and distinguish facts from propaganda, analysis from banter, and important news from coverage.”

In 1996, the National Council of Teachers of English, or NCTE, of which we are both members, endorsed a resolution that “viewing and visually representing are a part of our growing consciousness of how people gather and share information. ... Teachers should guide students in constructing meaning through creating and viewing non-print texts.”

In 2008, the NCTE’s executive committee recognized the importance of new digital/media literacies: “Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies [and] many literacies.”

Being media-and digital-literate means having the ability to access and assess online information, share knowledge, connect texts, collaborate with others, build networks, create and remix multimodal texts, and participate in online simulations or games.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills specifically lists “media literacy” as one of the vital and necessary skills today’s students must have to be competitive in a 21st-century workforce. Media literacy is embedded in the P21 curriculum-skills maps for English language arts, social studies, arts, and other disciplines.

For the past three years, the K-12 Horizon Report published by the New Media Consortium has declared that the top challenge for schools in the 21st century is “a growing need for formal instruction in key new skills, including information literacy, visual literacy, and technological literacy.”

Unfortunately, despite these consistent calls for more attention to media/digital literacies, many of the policy initiatives associated with the federal No Child Left Behind Act and increased use of standardized reading and writing tests continue to perpetuate a focus on teaching print literacies, at the expense of teaching media/digital literacies.

The strong focus on teaching reading-comprehension skills for print texts to prepare for standardized reading tests has ignored recent research indicating that understanding online texts requires the ability to locate icons or links related to one’s purpose for reading, necessitating a set of comprehension skills quite different from those used to process print texts. But those skills are not being taught because the focus is on preparing students for texts based on print literacies. And, because many state writing tests still require that some answers be handwritten, many teachers discourage the use of computers for writing to prepare students for these tests.

Meanwhile, the Common Core State Standards, currently adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, frame uses of media/digital literacies primarily in terms of comprehending and communicating information. For example, one of the reading standards for grades 6-12 says students should be able to: “synthesize and apply information presented in diverse ways (e.g., through words, images, graphs, and video) in print and digital sources in order to answer questions, solve problems, or compare modes of presentation”; and, one of the grades 6-12 writing standards: “use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and interact with others about writing.”

This focus marginalizes uses of a range of
other media/digital literacies associated with social-networking sites, blogs, wikis, digital images/videos, smartphone/tablet apps, video games, podcasts, etc., for constructing media content, building social networks, engaging audiences, and critiquing status quo problems.

And, other than a mention of the need to “evaluate information from multiple oral, visual, or multimodal sources,” there is no specific reference in the common standards to critical analysis and production of film, television, advertising, radio, news, music, popular culture, video games, media remixes, and so on. Nor is there explicit attention on fostering critical analysis of media messages and representations.

A 1999 national survey of state standards found elements of media literacy in almost every state’s teaching standards. As states adopt the common-core standards, the result may actually be a reduced focus on media and literacy instruction formally contained in state standards.

We therefore recommend four ways to address the common standards’ limited focus on media/digital literacies:

1. **Add additional standards for media/digital literacy.** The Common Core State Standards Initiative allows states to add their own standards for use in their schools (up to 15 percent of additional standards over and above the common core standards). We recommend that states focus on media/digital literacies involving both critical analysis of media/digital texts and the production of media/digital texts. For example, the media/digital standards added in Minnesota expect 11th and 12th graders to understand, analyze, evaluate, and use different types of print, digital, and multimodal media; evaluate the aural, visual, and written images and other special effects used in mass media for their ability to inform, persuade, and entertain; and examine the intersections and conflicts between visual (e.g., media images, painting, film, graphic arts) and verbal messages. The Minnesota standards emphasize both analysis and production, recognizing that, through production, students learn about media/digital texts. And, through analysis of media/digital texts, students develop criteria for assessing the quality of their productions.

2. **Build on the common-core standards to develop curriculum and instruction designed to integrate print and media/digital literacies.** The common standards formulate instructional goals; educators can then use those goals to develop curriculum and instruction designed to integrate print and media/digital literacies. For example, in fostering critical responses to literature, students can use blogs and wikis to facilitate the sharing of responses and to link to other texts, authors, themes, or issues evoked by a text, as well as to create digital video adaptations of literary texts. In teaching argumentative writing, teachers can require students to formulate pro and con positions on an issue as part of an online role play.

3. **Push for assessments that include measures of media/digital literacies that employ media/digital tools.** Two consortia, the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, which includes 30 states, and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, which includes 25 states, are developing computer-based assessments that will be implemented in 2014. Because these assessments will dictate the curriculum and instruction associated with implementation of the common standards, it is essential that they include some assessment of media/digital literacies. Assessments could require students to critique examples of media representations of race, class, or gender, or to engage in accessing and assessing the quality of online information.

4. **Support and fund professional development for teachers to help them incorporate media/digital literacy into instruction.** For busy classroom teachers, there is a need to provide in-service instruction. Already, several national groups, such as the International Society for Technology in Education, are poised to provide this training, but it must be offered and implemented regionally and locally.

The time to consider what’s missing in contemporary schools is past. We cannot afford to ignore students’ levels of engagement with digital-communication tools and popular culture in all subjects. Teachers need to demand that the implementation of the common-core standards includes a focus on teaching media/digital literacies in ways that make schooling relevant and meaningful and that better prepare students for life in the 21st century.

Richard Beach is a professor emeritus of literature and media at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Frank W. Baker is a national media-education consultant in Columbia, S.C., who operates the Media Literacy Clearinghouse website. Both are members of the National Council of Teachers of English and the organization’s Media and Digital Literacies Collaborative.
Competency-Based Schools Embrace Digital Learning

By Sarah D. Sparks

Tom Rooney sees competency-based education—supported by digital learning tools—as the path to building a better school district.

The superintendent of the 4,200-student Lindsay Unified School District in California, Rooney set in motion this school year a plan to move to a system in which students progress not on the basis of their age or a set school calendar, but by demonstrating proficiency on learning objectives.

Educators in the district are aware that the transition will undoubtedly hit some bumps in the road, as do most districtwide school improvement efforts. But school leaders entered the school year feeling well prepared because the district has been gradually putting competency-based education, or CBE, in place since the 2009-10 school year.

The move to competency-based education—also known as proficiency-, standards-, and performance-based education—by Lindsay Unified and other districts will likely give them a head start in preparing for the new demands of the Common Core State Standards, experts point out, and in their ability to use technology more effectively to personalize learning.

“We have these practices that are ingrained in the traditional public education system that are not consistent with principles of learning and not consistent with how most of the rest of the world operates,” says Rooney.

“Prior to kindergarten, everyone learns to talk at a different time,” he continues. “They get potty-trained at different times, but suddenly when you get to kindergarten, you’re placed in this box, and you’re given the kindergarten curriculum because you’re five, not because you’re ready for it, or even if you already know it all. Kids learn in different ways on different time frames.”

National advocates for competency-based education echo those sentiments, pointing out economic and policy forces that are building momentum for such an approach.

“We’re in a place right now with the forces of global competitiveness, the adoption of common core, all of these new learning models, and the desire to do student-centered, personalized learning—you can’t really do that in a time-based system,” says Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. The Alexandria, Va.-based iNACOL is a fervent advocate for competency-based education.

“Common core is a game changer because it’s going to allow us to be able to share best practices and knowledge of skills across states, and it’s going to keep the innovators that are developing online content from having to reinvent the wheel in 50 states,” says Patrick. The ability of states to collaborate will allow more districts to be able to implement pedagogies like competency-based education without having to start from scratch, she says.

Along with a number of other partners, such as the National Governors Association, MetisNet, Jobs for the Future, and the American Youth Policy Forum, iNACOL recently launched an initiative called CompetencyWorks that aims to promote competency-based education and provide resources for educators who are interested in learning more about the model.

The CompetencyWorks organizers hope to bring innovators together and help share their experiences with more schools and districts.

The concept is not new, but several factors have contributed to renewed interest in the structure, says Patrick.

“What’s different now is that [previously] it had to be entirely paper-based,” she says. “Now, with all of the new online and blended learning tools, teachers have a whole set of resources that can help them work with students on their learning goals. Teachers have a way to manage the personalization and allow the different pacing to happen in a very structured, goal-oriented way.”

In addition to helping teachers differentiate instruction for students, new technologies are giving rise to more powerful and detailed information systems that can help track students at the level of granularity that CBE requires, says Christine Sturgis, the founder of the Santa Fe, N.M.-based education consulting company MetisNet, one of the partners of CompetencyWorks.

“[CBE] creates an enormous amount of data about students and teachers and teacher effectiveness,” she says. New information systems are needed to make “data-rich and informed decisions,” adds Sturgis.

Based on conversations at a competency-based-learning summit held in March 2011, Sturgis and Patrick published a five-part working definition of CBE. Under the definition, students advance upon mastery, competencies are broken down into explicit and measurable learning objectives, assessment is meaningful for students, students receive differentiated support based on their learning needs, and learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include the application and creation of knowledge.

However, re-engineering schools to a competency-based model is not a silver bullet, and creating competencies must be done thoughtfully and carefully to be successful, Sturgis explains in a paper about designing competencies, published by CompetencyWorks.

“If the competencies, learning objectives, and rubrics are not designed well, students may become bored by low expectations, frus-
trated by high-level competencies without adequate scaffolding embedded in the learning objectives, or disengaged through inconsistent feedback from flawed rubrics,” the paper says. “Although it is obvious, it cannot be overstated: Well-designed competencies are one of the essential elements for high-quality competency education.”

‘Pace Does Matter’

Empowering students and making sure they know exactly what it is they should be learning and how it can be demonstrated is a key component of CBE, its advocates say.

“Learners really understand where they’re at and where they’re going next,” says Rooney, the Lindsay Unified superintendent.

To create their learning objectives, officials of his district brought together 30 teachers and about a dozen administrators to go through the California state education standards for grades K-12 and realign the information into need-to-know learning objectives. The district also worked with the Marzano Research Laboratory, run by educator Robert J. Marzano, to help design the new curriculum.

In addition, the group created a set of assessments to go with the curriculum to evaluate how well students learned the material.

After several years of tweaking those standards and piloting them in classes, the district moved to CBE officially in 2009-10 with the incoming class of 9th graders.

Teachers, who under the new system are now called learning facilitators, scrapped the traditional grading scale and moved to a 0-4 rubric, where a 3 is the minimum passing standard and 4 indicates that a student has gone above and beyond the requirements of mastery.

Although students in Lindsay Unified are still grouped into grade levels, each student is also grouped by a content level (readiness levels 1-13), so the learning facilitator knows exactly where every student falls in each subject area by content level. The district also built in opportunities to practice mastery informally during understandings,” says Hramiec. “Those are the big learning objectives that are the ones you want students to carry with them ten years from now.”

But at the Boston Day and Evening Academy, students have the flexibility to start up where they left off, she says.

Like Lindsay Unified, the Boston Day and Evening Academy has spent several years aligning the curriculum with state standards and breaking it down into need-to-know competencies.

“You start with [the standards] and from there pull out what you believe are the enduring understandings,” says Hramiec. “Those are the big learning objectives that are the ones you want students to carry with them ten years from now.”

All students must demonstrate competencies independently and multiple times to move on, she says. They are given many opportunities to practice mastery informally before the actual assessment.

Protecting Innovators

One state that has taken the lead in competency-based education is New Hampshire, which in 2005 eliminated the Carnegie unit, a seat-time-oriented way of accounting for students’ academic progress. Schools in the state were given until the 2008-09 school year to move from a time-based to a mastery-based system.

Those regulations extend to the statewide online public high school, the Exeter, N.H.-based Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, or VLACS, which has been competency-based since it opened in 2007.

When students take and complete courses at VLACS it is flexible, allowing students to move at their own pace. They can complete courses in 10 weeks or take as long as 36 weeks, says Steve Kossakoski, the chief executive officer of the school.

Students must score at least a 75 or greater on all competency-based assessments, out of a possible 100, in addition to receiving a passing average score on all the assignments (not just the ones pegged as competencies) in order to pass.

To help brick-and-mortar schools in the state meet the mastery-based requirements, VLACS has begun offering competency-recovery classes for students in regular schools who have fallen behind.

“In a traditional school, one of the things they’ve struggled with is what do you do with a student who hasn’t met competency in a world where everything is attendance-based?” says Kossakoski. In the competency-recovery courses that VLACS offers, the courses are

Prior to kindergarten, everyone learns to talk at a different time. They get potty-trained at different times, but suddenly when you get to kindergarten, you’re placed in this box, and you’re given the kindergarten curriculum because you’re five, not because you’re ready for it, or even if you already know it all. Kids learn in different ways on different time frames.”

TOM ROONEY
Superintendent, Lindsay Unified School District
Virtual Ed. Dives in to the Common Core

By Ian Quillen

Perhaps no segment of educators is more enthusiastic about the transition to the Common Core State Standards than those who work in virtual schools or in blended learning environments that mix face-to-face and online instruction.

With the standards’ emphasis on deeper learning, collaboration, and applied knowledge, some proponents of online education suggest their adoption could lead to the passage of policies that are more friendly to effective online learning. Meanwhile, many online programs are already practicing the other changes inherent in common-standards adoption, such as the use of computer-based online assessments.

“Opening up these learning trajectories and pathways through the common core—this is where we can really take advantage of tools and content in the digital environment,” says Susan D. Patrick, the president and chief executive officer of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL, located in Vienna, Va.

Because of that, leaders in virtual education have begun preparing for the transition and, in some cases, launching projects that, while not directly related to the common core, may stand to benefit greatly from its implementation.

For example, online content repositories have grown greatly in the number of repositories and quantity of learning objects—in individual items of digital educational content—thanks largely to the movement to align those learning objects to the common English/language arts and math standards and share them around the country.

At the same time, efforts to institute certification of teachers for online instruction also appear to have gained steam from the belief that the common standards could help push momentum for the recognition of those credentials across state borders.

One of those efforts, the Leading Edge Certification program launched in January by Computer-Using Educators, a professional association in California, has aims already of becoming a nationally recognized credential.

And Mike Lawrence, the executive director of the Walnut Creek-based group, says the implementation of the common standards will help ensure that the curriculum for the certification program is widely applicable.

“It was very much in our minds as we embarked on the project,” Lawrence says. “Without a common bar to demonstrate proficiency, it’s difficult to know whether [the certification is] going to work for your online program.”

Lawrence acknowledges that policy discussions are a big distance away from getting states to recognize certification from other states, but says he sees the adoption of the standards as a potential catalyst in that process.

“Just the fact that you have states talking to each other with a common language for the first time ever, that opens doors,” he says.

Emphasizing Innovation

At the Council of Chief State School Officers’ Innovation Labs Network, the strategic initiatives director, Linda Pittenger, is trying to drive some of those discussions and open those doors, not only around online learning, but also around the broader spectrum of educational innovation. (The Washington-based CCSSO partnered with the National Governors’ Association to lead the common-standards movement.)

The Innovation Labs Network is a nine-state coalition supported by the CCSSO that Pittenger says will address challenges relating to how to supplement the next-generation assessments created to test the common core by two separate consortia, how to personalize education while meeting those standards, and how to expand educational options for students and educators.

Pittenger, who previously served as the director of secondary and virtual learning for the Kentucky Department of Education and the state’s virtual school, says none of the nine states in the network is obligated to take a particular approach toward solving any of those problems. The idea of the model instead is to enable a quicker and more re-
liable exchange of information and insights from any efforts at reinventing a portion of a particular state's educational system.

But Pittenger sees online and blended learning as a likely vehicle for some of the states in the coalition of Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. She says this is particularly an answer for increasing educational options and allowing a more flexible course of study.

“You’re looking at more digital, open educational resources and modularity,” Pittenger says. “And I think this is one of the reasons that virtual learning, and online learning, is such a natural part of these kinds of environments. ... These are all characteristics of the sort of learning environments we are looking for.”

The Florida Virtual School, the largest state-sponsored online school in the country, is having to rethink its curricula because of the common standards—just like all schools, virtual or brick-and-mortar, in the participating states. Cindy Dulgar, a curriculum specialist and the resident subject-matter expert on the common core for the FLVS, suggests that virtual education may be a good fit for standards that place a greater emphasis on skills application and collaboration.

Focus on Effectiveness

For the past several months, Dulgar and her team have been delving into the content of the school’s courses in English/language arts and mathematics, the two subject areas of the new standards. They’ve been cross-checking to see where that content covers the necessary standards that are part of the course, and noting where gaps exist between current content and future standards.

During that process, Dulgar says, she’s become increasingly confident that the transition, while spurring some content changes, will in general be a natural one.

“The live lessons we do, the discussion-based assessments we do, ... those pieces are definitely going to help us make the shift,” she says. “I think the shift will cause us to change the way we do some of those things, but it will just be better.”

That’s not to say virtual schools won’t encounter their own difficulties during the adoption process, says Patrick of iNACOL. For example, the idea of having to give proctored online assessments could present funding challenges for virtual schools that have traditionally not had to build in the costs of facilities or face-to-face personnel, she says. For better or worse, she adds, the standards may also provide a more thorough and comparable measure of the quality of online and blended learning offerings at a time of increasing questions about the quality of online learning content.

“Now we can start to focus resources on high-quality curricula that are similar across 45 or 46 states,” Patrick says. “The outcome of that is to start to be able to look at online courses and modules of online courses and value-judge them on effectiveness.

“We could talk about that before, but it’s been difficult to do when there’s so many disparate standards.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. Will states open policies to a common teacher certification?
2. Can virtual schools afford to fund proctored exams?
3. Do virtual schools have an edge on teaching to the standards?
4. Will standards lead to more educational choice?
5. Are standards-driven digital projects helping online learning?
An excerpt from:

Understanding the central themes of the Common Core Standards and the need to develop digital literacy and 21st century skills in today’s classrooms

by Amber Parks, The Learning Project

Today’s students need to do more than just learn the concepts and skills introduced in daily instruction in order to be successful. They need to know how to use technology to acquire knowledge, analyze and evaluate information, explore, draw conclusions and test theories. More importantly, they need to know how to apply what they learned to real-life scenarios. Students need to learn how to think critically and creatively, navigate an increasingly digital world safely, and conduct meaningful research that will lead to understanding through discovery.

The goal of the Common Core State Standards is, in part, to promote these same skills throughout content area instruction. The standards are designed to facilitate student acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary for future success in college and career opportunities. Embedded in the standards are the goals of teaching students how to think critically, learn by doing, and develop the 21st century skills essential to future success.

The next generation of assessments like PARCC and Smarter Balanced are designed to assess the Common Core Standards and help prepare students to graduate high school being college and career ready. Succeeding on these assessments will require students to have the ability to apply digital literacy skills to demonstrate content understanding.

By strengthening students’ 21st century skills and providing opportunities for meaningful, real-world application of technology, teachers are also enabling students to develop the skills they need to successfully master the Common Core State Standards and prepare for next generation assessments.

Download the full white paper here: www.learning.com/digital-literacy
Digital literacy and the Core

From explicit technology requirements in Common Core Standards to sets of skills being necessary for completion of standards-based tasks and assessment questions, digital literacy skills are at the core of the Core. As reported in the most recent NAEP results, “[Technology] is becoming more the norm than the exception in our nation’s schools and certainly the way [to] communicate in college and the workplace” (Fleming, 2012).

Schools and teachers must be mindful of the three components of digital literacy, “reading digital text, writing digital text, and developing the technical skills necessary to consume and produce these texts” (Wood, 2012). Reading digital text refers to scanning the text on a site to preview headings, images, phrases and sentences to evaluate relevancy; managing the toggle bars to scroll down to read the entire piece, not just what they can see on the screen; highlighting and copying phrases and sentences to be incorporated into writing — with correct citation of course! Writing digital text involves utilizing word processing applications and software to effectively organize, write, and edit pieces of writing. Along with typing, writing digital text includes formatting, using spelling and grammar checks, and searching for stronger synonyms with in-program thesauruses. Lastly, technical skills involve effective search skills (e.g. how can a new phrase or reorganization of keywords impact search results?), the ability to evaluate the legitimacy of the information and source, and the aptitude to problem solve in an effort to find the most relevant, precise, and accurate information. As Ohler asserts, “being literate also means being able to integrate … media forms into a single narrative or ‘media collage,’ such as a web page, blog, or digital story. That is, students need to be able to use new media collectively as well as individually” (2009).

Just how critical are digital literacy skills for students? Beginning in spring of 2015, the Common Core assessments will primarily be tablet- or computer-based. Incorporation of digital tools has its own standard, six in the Common Core Writing Standards, to iterate the importance of digital tools in the researching, creating, and refining stages of writing. All written responses for next generation assessments will be typed. Starting in 4th grade, the Core Writing Standards require students be able to type two pages of text in one sitting with the number of pages students are to type in one sitting increasing with each subsequent grade level. Some, if not all sources of information (e.g. videos, podcasts, web pages, blogs, charts, presentations, Prezis, photos, etc.) for assessment tasks, will be web based. Students will be able to refer back to and review resources throughout the assessments. In some instances, students will be able to conduct additional research and incorporate additional resources into their writing during the assessment times. Said simply, digital literacy skills will be a determining factor in students’ performance on the next generation of assessments.

Now the work begins

The development and adoption of the standards was not the hard part. No, the difficult task of thorough implementation is just beginning. The standards alone do not guarantee success.

“...
In fact, most criticism around the standards addresses the minimal impact they will potentially have on what happens within classrooms. “Common state standards only target the differences between states, not within them, sharply limiting common state standards’ potential impact on achievement differences” (Loveless, 2012, p. 4). Indeed, while the focus on the standards is to provide a set of core, national benchmarks for students in grades K–12, it is up to individual states, school districts, and ultimately teachers to ensure that now, more than ever, students are being taught how to think critically, creatively, and flexibly.

The Common Core Standards and next generation assessments are preparing students for the 21st century knowledge economy. As the Standards explain, “To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and non-print texts in media forms old and new. The need to conduct research and to produce and consume media is embedded into every aspect of today’s curriculum. In like fashion, research and media skills and understandings are embedded throughout the Standards, rather than treated in a separate section” (Core Standards, 2010).

The major shifts embedded in the Core Standards are requiring educators to “reconsider both methodology and content” (Prensky, 2001, p. 3). Indeed, the next generation assessments will utilize integrated digital literacy skills, and “being able to read and write multiple forms of media and integrate them into a meaningful whole is the new hallmark of literacy” (Ohler, 2009).

Creating meaningful, relevant, and rigorous learning opportunities that utilize digital literacy skills and tools is the ultimate goal of the Core Standards. Students deserve it. Our world demands it. Without a doubt, now, more than ever, the main focus of education is to teach students how to think.

Download the full white paper here: www.learning.com/digital-literacy.
FCC Broadband Initiative Tackles School Needs

Two dozen companies join technology effort

By Ian Quillen

A public-private effort announced last month by the Federal Communications Commission to increase broadband Internet access in underserved communities has the potential for a heavy impact on K-12 students, the initiative's partners say.

Many of those contributing to “Connect to Compete”—which has two dozen private partners headlined by companies such as Microsoft, the Discovery Channel, and Best Buy—bring strong experience in educational outreach.

And although some educational technology advocates oppose the idea, the FCC may even explore funding some components of the initiative that tackle digital-literacy education with money from the $2.3 billion federal E-rate program. That program uses dollars from the Universal Service Fund, raised by a fee the FCC imposes on telecommunications companies, to subsidize school and library Internet-related purchases.

“We can tell that closing the digital-skills gap is going to be work that’s going to be largely based in schools and libraries,” said Alan Simpson, the vice president of policy for San Francisco-based Common Sense Media, which brings its experience as a children’s-media watchdog to the partnership.

“It’s hard to say exactly from this point how much we can grow all the components of this [initiative],” he continued. “It’s more about the kind of snowball effect that can build. How do we keep adding to it? That’s been one of the goals of public-private efforts in this space for quite some time.”

Only a few details have emerged so far, but those point heavily toward a focus on students.

For example, the Minneapolis-based Best Buy is preparing to devote 20,000 of its Geek Squad technology staff to help launch digital-literacy training in 20 cities across the nation. It will likely do so with the help of groups such as Common Sense Media and New York City-based CFY. Both organizations have historically focused on educating students, parents, and teachers on effective technology use.

And Microsoft Corp., the Redmond, Wash.-based software company, will work with partners to offer training in its Microsoft Office software—which includes programs like Word, PowerPoint, and Excel—in 15 states during the next three years through institutions such as schools, libraries, and community colleges. Roughly a half-dozen states already offer certifications for high school students who have mastered the software suite, which is a common requirement for many jobs.

Further, the inclusion of a handful of grassroots community organizations, perhaps most notably the Atlanta-based Boys & Girls Clubs of America, which runs educational, athletic, art, and career programs for youths nationwide, are seen by Connect to Compete’s commercial partners as key players for achieving the goal of reaching children.

“They’re actually the ones who will be carrying the message on the ground,” Dan MacFetridge, the business-development director for Microsoft’s “Shape the Future” program, said of those groups. “We have found the best single way to build awareness is to get kids talking to each other on the playground.”

Mr. MacFetridge said Shape the Future, which will be used to fulfill Microsoft’s role in Connect to Compete, has offered educational services to 10 million students in other countries.

E-Rate Changes Eyed

Meanwhile, the FCC is at least considering the use of E-rate funding to forward one of the goals of the initiative, which is to create a national standard for digital-literacy training.

“We plan to launch a proceeding to explore how the E-rate program can expand access to digital-literacy training at more public libraries and schools across the country and, ultimately, forming a Digital Literacy Corps,” Julius Genachowski, the chairman of the FCC, said in prepared remarks at an event in Washington launching Connect to Compete.

The overview document from the FCC also says reforming the Universal Service Fund, which directs money to the E-rate and other programs, is a necessary step to achieve the initiative’s goals.

The E-rate—short for “education rate”—has undergone incremental changes since Mr. Genachowski became chairman in 2009. Those tweaks include the application of an index for inflation to the program, which had been funded at $2.25 billion annually since 1997, as well as the unveiling of pilot programs testing ways to expand the E-rate’s reach to mobile and wireless technologies.

But while advocates of educational technology have lauded the FCC’s willingness to innovate, they have also expressed hesitation at the notion that the E-rate would pay for a broader range of programs without a substantial increase in its overall funding.

“E-rate is dramatically oversubscribed, and there has been an unwillingness to raise the cap sufficiently to meet the demand around infrastructure,” said Keith R. Krueger, the chief executive officer of the Washington-based Consortium for School Networking. “To then expand it to a new resource around digital literacy, we think, is unsustainable.

“If the FCC wishes to look to other areas of the Universal Service Fund,” he said, “that would be something we would support. But we cannot support using E-rate funds for this purpose.”

Josh Gottheimer, the senior counselor to the FCC chairman, said that such concerns are premature, and that any substantial alterations to E-rate funding would be made with significant input from stakeholders in educational technology.

“We want to make sure we’re being innovative with the fund to keep up with the benefit and opportunities of technology, and
at the same time not doing anything to destabilize it,” Mr. Gottheimer said.

‘Emerging Market’

Prudence aside, Connect to Compete may represent the widespread effort to reach disadvantaged students with technology that some technology advocates have been awaiting for years.

Ken Eisner, the vice president of policy and new business development at One Economy, a nonprofit organization focused on giving connectivity to underserved communities, and a partner in Connect to Compete, said such an alliance may be coming together now not because of a lack of desire in the past, but because of a favorable confluence of conditions.

For one, Mr. Eisner said, there is the leadership and vision represented in the FCC’s National Broadband Plan—which includes many of the goals espoused by Connect to Compete—as well as the National Education Technology Plan released by the U.S. Department of Education. (Both documents were published in early 2010.) Then, he said, there is the increasing popularity of private-public partnerships, as public organizations work to combat budget constraints and companies look for new sources of business during lean economic times.

“Microsoft has really not just been looking at this as a philanthropic endeavor, but as an emerging market,” Mr. Eisner said. “There are 100 million people that haven’t adopted broadband, and this is where their growth market can come from.”

PROJECT PARTNERS

Several of the Federal Communications Commission’s partners in Connect to Compete are expected to have significant influence on the initiative’s effect on K-12 education. They include:

Best Buy
http://geeksquadacademy.com/summeracademy/
In the Minneapolis-based electronics retailer’s commitment to direct 20,000 of its Geek Squad employees to the cause of teaching digital literacy, the company is expected to utilize other initiative partners’ curricular resources created for K-12 students, teachers, and parents.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America
http://www.bgca.org/
The Atlanta-based leaders of youth centers nationwide are expected to be key messengers about the program’s opportunities in the communities they serve.

CFY
http://cfy.org/
The New York City-based educational technology nonprofit Computers for Youth will offer resources from its digital-learning program. The program, focused on middle schools, has offered technology access and training to teachers, students, and parents in underserved school systems.

Common Sense Media
http://www.commonsensemedia.org/
This San Francisco-based watchdog group on children’s media is expected to contribute its digital-literacy curriculum and resources.

Discovery Education
http://www.discoveryeducation.com/
The educational arm of the Discovery Channel, with headquarters in Silver Spring, Md., will contribute video content, digital lessons, and other curricular materials to initiative programs.

Microsoft Corp.
http://www.microsoft.com/education
The Redmond, Wash.-based software company has committed to offer training in 15 states through schools and libraries on the use of its Microsoft Office software, which is a standard tool in many contemporary office jobs.

One Economy
http://www.one-economy.com/
This Washington-based nonprofit group devoted to connecting underserved communities to technology is expected to use its knowledge of those communities to direct other participants’ offerings to selected districts and schools.

Sesame Workshop
http://www.sesameworkshop.org/
The nonprofit educational media organization, based in New York City, is expected to be another resource for content for initiative programs.

SOURCES: Federal Communications Commission; Education Week
When the folks at Common Sense Media visited New York’s Harlem Children’s Zone to gain feedback about a digital literacy curriculum they were developing, they wondered if the concept would even register among the challenges of inner-city students and teachers.

They don’t any longer.

“What we learned was that it was incredibly important,” said Linda Burch, chief education and strategy officer of the nonprofit, San Francisco-based online education advocacy group, during a meeting at this week’s ISTE 2010 ed-tech conference in Denver.

“The issues of a cyberbullying or a bullying situation ... can get amplified on Twitter. It moves on to MySpace, people organize, and then it ultimately, in one case, led to youth violence. So [those teachers] see a very direct link between needing to educate their kids early about the basics of digital citizenship and how the technology amplifies all of that behavior.”

Burch’s observation reinforces the stance of the Federal Communications Commission and the U.S. Department of Education, which have both indicated teaching digital literacy and citizenship—especially in underserved areas—must be a priority. And if Burch’s goal of writing digital literacy and citizenship policy into the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is realized, there’s a good chance the curriculum CSM unveiled before the conference could serve as an unofficial national standard of sorts; FCC chairman Julius Genachowski was a founding member of CSM, and the group has already been a fixture in policy discussions.

“Our role has really been to say these issues of children’s behavior [online] really belong in the center of education as opposed to justice and law enforcement.” Burch said. “Because this is about empowering young people to navigate this world responsibly and ethically. And it’s about doing that in the context of school and home.”

Based on the research of Harvard University education professor Howard Gardner, the Digital Citizenship in a Connected Culture curriculum is framed around the principle that students must understand the impact of their digital conduct on themselves, their friends and family, and their greater community. But it also acknowledges the vast learning opportunities the online world provides, a balance Burch said is important to gain credibility.

Shira Lee Katz, a digital media project manager for CSM who helped develop the curriculum and sat in on many student focus groups, agreed.

Students said, “Our parents can be scared of media and fearful about its impact,” Katz said. “We want to hear stories about kids who are doing great things with media. We don’t want to be told this is bad.” They really cautioned against giving them warnings.

The curriculum, which is geared toward grades 6-8, blends print, online, and video lessons, and has five units: Digital Life, Privacy and Digital Footprints, Self-Expression and Identity, Connected Culture, and Respecting Creative Work. Three units are already available for free online; Self Expression and Identity, and Respecting Creative Work will be available in August.

The curriculum conforms to content standards set by the International Society of Technology in Education, and will also be aligned to state standards and national Common Core standards if needed, Burch said.

CSM also just acquired the CyberSmart K-12! curriculum in an attempt to expand its own efforts beyond the middle school level. And there are other similar curricula in the marketplace, including one developed by ISTE and Microsoft, which focuses more on the use of the Internet as a research tool rather than a social forum.

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Because this is about empowering young people to navigate this world responsibly and ethically. And it’s about doing that in the context of school and home.”

LINDA BURCH
Chief Education and Strategy Officer,
Common Sense Media
Students Learn Cyber Skills At a No-Tech School

By Francesca Duffy

At the Journey School in Aliso Viejo, Calif., technology does not play a role in the classroom until students enter the 6th grade—and even then the emphasis is not on gadgets but on civics. The Orange County Register reports that the K-8 charter school, founded in 2000 by a group of parents, implements the “Waldorf” approach to education, meaning computers take a back seat to hands-on physical and art-based activities such as music, storytelling, gardening, and knitting. Even so, the school’s “Cyber Civics” program teaches middle school students about safe and proper online behavior.

Shaheer Faltas, an administrator at the 300-student school, told the Register that cyber-bullying and sexting have not been problems at Journey partly because of the lessons taught through the Cyber Civics program. “As the children mature we recognize that, as they get into middle school, we want them to use these tools that we have for the good and for their learning,” said Faltas. “We don’t think they need a lot of instruction in how you use Excel or Microsoft Word—what they need to know is what is the appropriate use of these resources.”

The Cyber Civics program has students learn about digital citizenship in the 6th grade, while 7th grade focuses on information and research literacy. Eighth graders learn about media literacy and work on a project that requires them to conduct research and correctly cite information online. Students also learn how to dissect computers in their last year to get a closer look at how they work.

Diana Graber, the cyber civics teacher at Journey, explained that some of the exercises she implements in class are designed to get students to think twice before they post something on a public site. “It’s almost like safe sex,” said Graber. “You teach them how to be safe before they go out there, so that hopefully they’ll understand what can happen with private information if you’re not careful.”

Why Digital Natives Need Help With Technology

By Anthony Rebora

n a fascinating article in Scientific American, teachers Jody Passanisi and Shara Peters make the case that, while kids today have a seemingly innate facility with technology, they are quick to become impatient and discouraged when faced with complex tasks involving digital tools:

Since children these days are classified as being native to all things digital, one would think they should be able to master the operation of anything with an “on” button. This mistakenly groups all technology, including video games and online search engines, in the same category. Just because a child jumps at the opportunity to program a TV to record his or her favorite shows does not mean that he or she will approach a classroom learning tool with the same zeal. In our experience, if students are not able to find answers to an Internet search in the first few results pages, they say “I can’t find it,” instead of adjusting their search, or reexamining the results in depth.

Passanisi and Peters go on to argue that teachers have a responsibility to help students use technology in ways that take them beyond the types of instant gratification they have come to expect (practically as a birthright) from consumer products and video games:

Just because these students are digital natives, does not mean that they do not need guidance to navigate the digital world—both in terms of learning how to discern important and relevant information from a large swath of data, and also to be able to inquire and solve problems that take time, thought, and energy. This is perhaps the best response I’ve seen to the question of why schools should integrate technology into instruction when kids’ lives are already immersed in it. It’s an issue, partly, of making sure they don’t miss the forest for the trees.
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