

## Good Schools, the Salt of Society

By Carol Jago

Three hundred years ago Cotton Mather preached that, “ A Good School deserves to be call’d the very Salt of the Town that hath it.” Without a school “wherein the Youth may by able Masters be Taught the Things that are necessary to qualify them for future Serviceableness,” a community will founder. Mather’s advice to townspeople in Puritan New England reflects one of the philosophical underpinnings of the Common Core Curriculum Maps in English Language Arts Standards. Schools matter. Curriculum matters. Teachers matter.

In order to determine which things should be taught, we must of course first define what it means to be serviceable in a twenty-first century democratic society. To ensure a capable workforce and build a strong economy, high levels of literacy and numeracy are obviously essential. But what about the need for students to develop empathy and thoughtfulness? It is short-sighted to equate the value of education with economic growth. Like salt, Good Schools with rich curricula enhance the community by adding depth—and piquancy. Like salt, they are a preservative, ensuring that the a society’s values of society prevail.

Many of the benefits we’ve come to demand as our right in a modern society depend upon high levels of employment, but if we shift the discussion of the purpose of school from job training to preparing America’s children to lead a worthwhile life, the calculus changes. Is simply working nine-to-five for 40 years what you most aspire to for your children? Or do you want them to have an education that invites exploration of essential questions, inspires challenges to the *status quo*, and somehow prepares them for the what we cannot yet know? Most parents want both. The conundrum for curriculum developers is to avoid becoming so caught up in preparing students to make a living – which starts with paying attention in kindergarten; earning good grades through elementary school, middle school, and high school; achieving competitive SAT and ACT scores; and winning a place in college or in the workplace - that we lose sight of educating students to enrich their lives.

In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, philosopher Martha Nussbaum warns that, “With the rush to profitability in the global market, values precious for the future of democracy, especially in an era of religious and economic anxiety, are in danger of getting lost” (6). I share her concern. The movement to reform education to make the United States more globally competitive seems wrong-headed and even counter-productive. Maybe I lack competitive spirit, but what I have always wanted for my students is more than coming in first. I want them to learn about and to think about the world, today’s world and yesterday’s. Nussbaum explains that, “World history and economic understanding must be humanistic and critical if they are to be at all useful in forming intelligent global citizens, and they must be taught alongside the study of religion and of philosophical theories of justice. Only then will they supply a useful foundation for the public debates that we must have if we are to cooperate in solving major human problems” (94). One means of learning about the problems that have beset and continue to bedevil humanity is through the study of the humanities — literature and art, history and philosophy. This is the kind of education the Common Core Curriculum Maps offer. I believe it is the education that every generation of citizens need.

Unit Three of the Grade One curriculum map, “Life Lessons,” offers young children opportunities to explore the kind of education Martha Nussbaum recommends. As they work through the unit, “Students read and listen to fables with morals. They learn about rules for life in a book of manners. Reading the life story of George Washington Carver, students learn about a man who had to overcome obstacles in life to make important contributions to science and agriculture. Students learn about Thomas Edison’s work with electricity and the rules for its safe use. Descriptive words are the focus of a lesson centered on the artwork of Georgia O’Keeffe. Finally, the children write narratives focused on life lessons and create informative posters focused on electrical safety.” This interdisciplinary approach integrates the study of science, building students’ background knowledge and in so doing strengthens their reading comprehension and develops their facility with reading informational texts — a key aspect expectation of the Common Core State

Standards. It also invites children to investigate Georgia O'Keefe's paintings and build their cultural literacy.

Some readers of the Common Core Curriculum Maps may argue that their students won't read 19th-century novels, that 21<sup>st</sup>-century students raised on Twitter need a greater pace and different kinds of text. I say language arts classrooms may be the last place where young people can unplug themselves from the solipsism of Facebook postings and enter a *milieu* different from their own in order to learn about human problems worthy of attention. "But my students won't do the homework reading I assign," teachers wail. It isn't as though students don't have the time. A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation reports that children aged eight to eighteen spend an average of seven and a half hours daily "consuming entertainment media." And this does not include the hour and a half a day they spend texting friends. Today's students have the time to read; they simply choose not to. To those who look at the suggested works for the high school Common Core Curriculum Maps and think, "Our students could never read those books," I urge perusal of the primary grade curriculum maps. If children were immersed in rich literature and nonfiction from the first days of kindergarten and engaged in classroom conversations that encouraged them to think deeply about what they read, negotiating Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in eleventh grade and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* in twelfth is possible. Though such books pose textual challenges for young readers, as part of a continuum and under the tutelage of an "able Master," the work is doable. In our effort to provide students with readings that they can relate to, we sometimes end up teaching works that students can read on their own at the expense of teaching more worthwhile texts that they most certainly need assistance negotiating.

I use the word "work" here intentionally. Too often teachers proclaim that, "Reading is fun!" and in so doing suggest to their charges that when the classroom task is tough there must be something wrong either with the book or with the reader. Neither is the case. We need to remind ourselves that curriculum should be aimed at what Lev Vygotsky (1962) calls students' zone of proximal development.

Vygotsky wrote that, “the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it” (104). Classroom texts should pose intellectual challenges for readers and invite them to stretch and grow. Students also need books that feed their personal interests and allow them to explore “the road not taken.” Reading a broad range of books makes students stronger readers and over time stronger people. Rigor versus relevance doesn’t need to be an either/or proposition. Without artful instruction by able masters, students can acquire the literacy skills they need not only to meet Common Core State Standards but also to meet the challenges this brave new world is sure to deal them.

Reading literature also helps students explore hypothetical scenarios and consider the ramifications of what might *prima facie* seem to be a good or profitable idea. Consider the Common Core Curriculum maps’ final Grade Seven Unit “Literature Reflects Life: Making Sense of Our World.” Addressing Common Core Reading Standard RL7.6, “Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text,” the map recommends students read Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. This 19<sup>th</sup>-century novella invites young readers to reflect upon their own conflicting natures and offers a cautionary tale regarding experimentation. When we consider how best to prepare tomorrow’s doctors, scientists, programmers, and engineers for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems to me that reading stories about investigations that go very wrong is a very good idea.

The final unit in the Grade Twelve Common Core Curriculum map employs W. H. Auden’s “Age of Anxiety” as its focus and invites students to “consider both the breakdown and affirmation of meaning in twentieth century literature. Reading stories like Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* helps students who are about to take their place as adults in society to see the world both as it is and as it might be. As they grapple with the strange account of a young man who wakes up one morning only to find he has metamorphosed into a bug, students begin to reflect upon the inhumane circumstances that caused Gregor’s transformation. How can one avoid becoming another Gregor Samsa? What can we do to insure a balance between supporting a family and creating meaning in our own lives?

Later in his sermon, Cotton Mather states that, “the Devil cannot give a greater Blow to the Reformation among us, than by causing Schools to Languish under Discouragements.” The Common Core Curriculum Maps offer hope to teachers. They offer a plan for developing young minds, a plan that is both rigorous and has never been more relevant. It may seem odd to be taking guidance from a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan, but I know I couldn’t say it better. “Where schools are not vigorously and Honourably Encouraged, whole Colonies will sink apace into a Degenerate and Contemptible Condition, and at last become horribly Barbarous. If you would not betray your Posterity into the very Circumstances of Savages, let Schools have more Encouragement.” Amen.

### **Works Cited**

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### **Possible sidebar**

“It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably for lack of what is found there.” - William Carlos Williams

### **About the author**

**Carol Jago** has taught English in middle and high school for 32 years and directs the California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA. She served as president of the

National Council of Teachers of English and as AP Literature content advisor for the College Board. She now sits on their English Academic Advisory committee. She has published six books with Heinemann including *With Rigor for All* and *Papers, Papers, Papers*. She has also published four books on contemporary multicultural authors for NCTE's High School Literature series. Carol was an education columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, and her essays have appeared in *English Journal*, *Language Arts*, *NEA Today*, as well as in other newspapers across the nation. She edits the journal of the California Association of Teachers of English, *California English*, and served on the planning committee for the 2009 NAEP Reading Framework and the 2011 NAEP Writing Framework. Carol was a member of the feedback committee for the Common Core Standards initiative.