

NNHS English Department's Common Core Implementation

By Melissa Dilworth, NNHS English Department Chair
March 27, 2013

This is an update on the implementation of the ELA Common Core at Newton North High School. The NNHS English department has spent some time becoming familiar with the CCSS. Teachers have identified both where the current curriculum already aligns with the standards and where gaps and/or inconsistencies exist. Teachers also spent the March PD ½ day drafting essential questions, targeting CCSS skills and identifying cornerstone tasks for grades 9-11 that align with the CCSS. A next step will be to share curriculum work with one another and tighten it so this document can be published to students and the Newton community.

Reading Standards for Literature 9-12

Where we are:

The Newton North High School English curriculum already meets many of the CCSS reading standards. Teachers teach students to cite “strong and thorough evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” (standard 1). This standard is currently evident in reading of fiction and non-fiction alike. Teachers also focus on helping students “determine theme or central idea of a text” (standard 2), “analyze complex characters” (standard 3), “analyze the impact of author’s choices regarding elements of a story” (standard 3), “determine the meaning of words and phrases, including figurative and connotative meaning” (standard 4), “analyze...an author’s choices in structure” (standard 5) and “[distinguish] what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant” (standard 6). These particular skills were fundamental to the NNHS English curriculum prior to Massachusetts’ adoption of the Common Core and will continue to be part of the curriculum.

Next steps:

Standard 7: “Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.” Like Newton South, the activities listed above are routinely asked of students at Newton North. They are an integral part of the curriculum but not yet, part of the mandated curriculum.

Standard 8: “Analyze a work of fiction, poetry, or drama using a variety of critical lenses (e.g. formal, psychological, historical, sociological, feminist).” This particular standard is also not currently part of the mandated curriculum. Several junior honors teachers teach some critical lenses, but this standard is not a regular part of the curriculum. A next step will be to make it a standard for all junior teachers.

Reading Standards for Informational Text 9-12

The Common Core places an emphasis on literary non-fiction that has not traditionally been mandated in the NNHS English curriculum.

Where we are:

Currently there is non-fiction reading as a standard in grade ten only, particularly in the sophomore Martin Luther King, Jr. speech unit. Students read a variety of speeches and, when doing so, address the same skills as those for literary analysis (standards 1-7). Similarly, in junior English most students read texts by Puritans such as Jonathan Edwards or William Bradford, essays by Thoreau and Emerson, sections of Frederick Douglass, and longer works such as *Into the Wild* or *In Cold Blood*. However, this non-fiction is not explicitly stated as a core part of the curriculum.

In senior year, the implementation of this standard is difficult given that the curriculum is a series of electives. However, two of the cornerstone tasks speak to the CCSS standards. All seniors have a personal writing component within them, despite the different areas of concentration. As part of this unit, all students read a variety of non-fiction essays to help them tell their own stories. All seniors also undertake a final senior English project within their particular elective. As part of this project, students must do research and read essays, historical texts, and other non-fiction to contribute to their final analyses or creative projects.

Next Steps:

This work in non-fiction is a shared responsibility, especially with science and history. Therefore, there will be meetings with both the history and science department chairs to address reading non-fiction across the curriculum.

The department will need summer PD and/or in-service time to add more literary non-fiction as a core part of our curriculum. The Newton South English Department has lists of literary non-fiction for grades 9-11, and Newton North will use this annotated bibliography as a resource.

Writing 9-12

Where we are:

Standards 1 and 2 have been essential components of the NNHS English curriculum long before the common core. Writing analyses with claims and relevant evidence is the core of literary analysis at North. Also, students learn to write personally and creatively (standards 3 and 4) and strive by junior and senior years to erase the divides between analytical, personal and creative writing. Students also learn all aspects of the writing process: “planning, revising, editing, rewriting or trying a new approach” (standard 5).

In both the sophomore speech unit as well as the senior year English projects, students “gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources” and “integrate information into the text selectively” as required in standards 7-9.

Lastly, students write “routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames” (standard 10) consistently in all four years.

Next steps:

While all junior students “write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events,” (standard 3) this writing and the assessment of it need to be more explicit in the ninth and tenth grades.

While several teachers “use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products” (standard 6), this particular standard is not uniform in the department. Teachers have two digital tools — Google docs and Turnitin.com — that are used by different teachers to meet their particular learning objectives. OurNewton is a new learning platform that will provide access to curriculum units, development of course websites, ability to co-write, and provide online plagiarism detection, grammar check, and student portfolio and assessment tools. The teachers in the English department need professional development in this platform and all its functions.

The department also needs to identify cornerstone writing assignments for each year and to determine benchmark exemplars for that writing.

Language and Speaking 9 –12

Where we are:

There is a departmental scope and sequence for grammar that currently meets the CCSS standards 1-3. Teachers are currently in the process of assessing the effectiveness of this sequence and revising it so it is more effective.

English classes at Newton North regularly ask students to “participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions” (standard 1) and “present information, findings and supporting evidence...appropriate to purpose, audience and task” (standard 4).

Each sophomore is required to research, write, and present a 3-minute persuasive speech as part of the sophomore speech unit.

Each senior researches a self-generated topic related to their senior course of study. As part of this project, each senior gives oral presentations.

Next steps:

While many teachers teach vocabulary, it is not yet a core part of every student’s English education. The department needs to look at best practices and consult other schools or read about ELA vocabulary instruction in order to determine a revised vocabulary curriculum.

In addition to having the clear written guidelines for writing instruction, the department needs to work on an ongoing basis to ensure uniform implementation. The conversation about what constitutes good writing is crucial to the success of the English department, and certainly does not end with a written curriculum or even student model texts.

While teachers prepare students in public speaking, they do not consistently instruct students in the digital tools associated with doing effective presentations (such as Prezi, Vimeo). Professional development is needed to explore and learn these digital tools.

This is an overview of the current state of the English curriculum at Newton North. For further questions; contact Melissa Dilworth, Department Head, at melissa.dilworth@newton.k12.ma.us

Works Cited

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. *Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy*. N.p.: n.p., 2011. Print.