



Common Core, Common Good, and Uncommon Student Engagement

SUMMARY

This teacher asks her students, “Are you learning, or are you just getting it done?” Issues of social justice are paramount to this author, and many of the Common Core Learning Standards in ELA focus on gathering accurate information from reliable sources. These students are engaged with projects related to improving their world. They track down the facts about human rights violations and point toward solutions — based on research and evidence.

“A little bit of attention can go

a long way.” These are the words of Nicholas Kristof, editorial writer for *The New York Times*. Kristof doesn’t know it, but he has been my co-teacher at Mineola High School for many years now. I’ve been incorporating his writing and videos into my lessons in order to help my high school ELA students connect what we read with the current state of our world. Making this connection isn’t enough. Noted service learning expert Cathryn Berger Kaye tells us that once students recognize social injustice it is important to show that they have a choice (2010). They can be passive or they can take action.

Taking Action

The following is a description of how many of the instructional shifts needed for student attainment of the *New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts*

& *Literacy* (CCLS/ELA) can be implemented through projects related to social justice. This particular project was pursued with an 11th-grade Advanced Placement Language and Composition course — which means standards for this class would be based on “the next logical step up” from the college and career readiness baseline established by CCLS/ELA (p. 4). The approaches described below can be used across content areas and secondary settings.

As a class, we read *A Long Way Gone*, the true story of Ishmael Beah, who, at 12 years old, becomes an unwilling boy soldier. This occurs during the civil war in Sierra Leone. His village is attacked while he is not there. Amidst the violence and chaos of war, he and his brother end up wandering from village to village to survive. They commit acts, such as stealing, that they never imagined they could do. My students were quickly drawn to this engaging work of nonfiction. They developed a

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better knowledge of world history, and they became more appreciative of their relatively peaceful and comfortable childhoods. Upon completing the book, students were eager to take action.

Students worked in groups of four to gather information about a specific issue related to children's rights violations in different regions of the world. Research topics ranged from child soldiers in Uganda and Somalia to national and international child sex slaves to the impact of poverty on a child's education in the United States. Each group compiled their findings into a detailed outline that they used to organize a presentation on their topic. A rubric helped students understand the importance of each component of their research experience, and they had input regarding the weighting of different outcomes. The students' presentations took on substantial meaning because they not only presented to their peers, they also addressed the

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Project Directions: Children's Rights Research

OVERVIEW

For the next few days, you will be working with your fellow students to change your world. You will research and design a campaign to call people to take action related to children's rights.

STEP 1: Research

Choose from one of the topics listed below. If there is another topic that you want to address, you can inquire:

- Sweatshops
- Child Soldiers
- Children as Victims of War
- Child Sex Slaves
- Toxic Stress Syndrome
- The Effect of Drugs on Newborns and Adolescents
- Poverty and Education in the US
- Child Victims of Domestic Abuse

Once your group has agreed upon an issue of concern, gather information from at least three sources — for example, Amnesty International at www.amnesty.org; Enough Is Enough at www.enough.org; and UNICEF at www.unicef.org

STEP 2: Formulate Your Campaign

- Outline your 12-15-minute presentation
- Create a PowerPoint or Prezi with an embedded video (3-5 minutes)
- Create a pamphlet or fact sheet for listeners to take away
- Create or find a petition on www.change.org to enable your audience to take action

STEP 3: Make Your Presentation

Please note that the "Listener Feedback Forms" will count as part of your final grade.

This is about more than just earning a grade. This is about changing the world!

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New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

This activity addresses and builds beyond many of the Standards. A few of the most relevant are:

RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

a. Develop factual, interpretive, and evaluative questions for further exploration of the topic(s).

WHST.11-12.8 Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the specific task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

W.11-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

a. Explore topics dealing with different cultures and world viewpoints.

Given that students were required to work collaboratively while conducting their research and to present their findings to a formal audience, all grade-specific standards for Speaking and Listening were met as well.

school principal, the instructional leader for ELA, and the students in Dr. Vicky Giouroukakis' graduate education class at Molloy College.

Presentations were enhanced by the development of a *Prezi* that the students designed to clarify their message. A *Prezi* is a presentation tool that is similar to PowerPoint; however, there is the ability to zoom in and out of content and to pan and rotate objects. This gives a *Prezi* more of a cinematic three-dimensional feel.

Writing from Sources

The Instructional Shift most clearly addressed through this research experience is *Writing from Sources*. Teachers:

- Expect that students will generate their own informational texts (spending much less time on **personal narratives**).
- Present opportunities to write from **multiple sources** about a single topic.
- Give **opportunities to analyze, synthesize** ideas across many texts to draw an opinion or conclusion.
- Find ways to push towards a style of writing where the **voice comes from drawing on powerful, meaningful evidence**. (New York State Education Department, 2012, p. 11)

Sources included both class-wide texts and those found during student research. The common texts that inspired the research were, as noted above, *A Long Way Gone* and several articles by Nicholas Kristof. The articles from *The New York Times* presented challenging common texts for my students. Most groups referred back to the details from these works during their presentations. Students were expected to:

- Analyze their sources
- Construct strong arguments as to why people should take action
- Base these arguments on evidence
- Incorporate powerful appeals to pathos through narratives of victims
- Consider their audience when deciding what evidence from sources to include in their writing and speaking

Outlines are very effective tools for helping students reach an exceptional skill level with Writing from Sources. My higher education partner and co-author, Vicky Giouroukakis and I reflected on the research process, and developed guidelines and methods for rigorous and purposeful research on a social issue. By working to find answers to the questions on the outline, students could ensure thorough

Presentation Outline

I. Introduction: State the basic facts.

- A. Who is being hurt?
- B. What is happening to them?
- C. Why is it happening?
- D. Where is this happening?
- E. When did this begin?

II. Provide more details to develop your reasoning (use your note-taking guide).

- A. Show statistics.
- B. Include an anecdote (this may be where you refer to a video).

III. Introduce the agency that you believe can effect the greatest change regarding this issue.

- A. What has this agency done?
- B. Why do you consider it trustworthy?
- C. What is the agency currently doing to address this issue?

IV. Call for Action: What do you want the audience to do? Explain.

V. Conclusion: End with a summary, clincher, an inspiring quote or fact.

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investigation and clear, concise reporting of findings (see “Presentation Outline”). Outlines can also be particularly helpful with providing supports to students with unique learning characteristics, such as students with disabilities or those learning English. The emphasis of this outline was on the text and critiquing the nature of the source when addressing the questions (Giouroukakis & Connolly, 2012).

Listener Feedback Form

(Text in red added as a result of reflection)

Reviewer's Name _____

Students who presented to you: _____

Topic of presentation: _____

Please note any new information or striking statistics/anecdotes that students shared with you.

Did students draw on evidence from credible sources and communicate their sources to you?

In addition to conveying the main ideas of the global issue that concern them, did students provide you with information regarding simple steps that you can take to invoke change? Please explain.

1. How clearly did students convey the information to you?

Very clearly Somewhat clearly Somewhat unclearly Unclear

2. How well did students convey their passion or concern for this topic?

Very clearly Somewhat clearly Somewhat unclearly Unclear

3. Did they convince you that their passion was based on facts from reliable sources?

Other comments?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

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Public Presentations — More Than “A Little Bit of Attention”

As stated above, students presented to peers, administration, and pre-service teachers at Molloy College. Students offered nine presentations over the course of an evening that took us around the world and opened our eyes to a range of social injustice connected to children. Responses to the “Listener Feedback Form” from all who were involved as audience members were extremely positive. Not only were people impressed with the quality of the information and the creative use of technology, but audience members also commented at length on students’ passion and dedication to the cause that they had researched.

Teachers Reflect on Standards and Shifts and Critique Their Work for Continuous Improvement

Every teacher needs to constantly critique her or his work. At left you will see the Listener Feedback Form. I noted in red some modifications I would make next time to put even greater emphasis on skills related to Writing from Sources.

Students Reflect on Standards

I provided students with a list of the College and Career Ready Anchor Standards and asked them to note which Standards this experience helped them to meet and exceed. Students indicated:

- The research component helped them to read for key ideas and details (R.CCR.1-3)
- They were able to integrate knowledge and ideas (R.CCR.7-9)
- They engaged with complex text (R.CCR.10)
- *Prezi* helped with their organization of information (W.CCR.4)
- They developed their awareness of the bias of some authors and jargon used in their sources (R.CCR.4-6)
- Most revised the “finished” presentation many times (W.CCR.5)
- They used focused questions (W.CCR.7), noting that the questions in the Presentation Outline guided their research and the development of their presentation
- The use of diverse media formats in speaking and listening “makes it interesting so that people aren’t just hearing statistics” (SL.CCR.2)

While I believe this research experience took students beyond the Standards in several ways, the most striking — based on my observation as well as student feedback — is the way students assessed the rhetoric of their sources. By the time students took part in this research in late spring, they had developed a keen sense of author bias and a strong appreciation for authors’ language and structure. They read for information that was important to include so as to convey the experience of children who are suffering and to support their calls for action. In addition, they assessed the rhetoric of text and media to find language and images that were exceptionally powerful and therefore supportive of their purpose, and they were wary of bias within their sources that could potentially weaken their presentation.

“Are You Learning, or are You Just Getting it Done?”

This research experience was effective and important for several reasons:

- Students were engaged in high-level research for which they were expected to meet rigorous expectations. They refined and expanded their skills in critiquing sources and sharing and integrating relevant facts.

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This was about more than “just getting it done.”

- Students developed their own social skills, confidence, and voice through participation in this experience. The incorporation of cooperative learning into the research process reflects the way that research is often conducted in today’s world — in community rather than in isolation.
- Students saw their work as meaningful and purposeful because it allowed them to advocate for change.

My students and I posted a sign in my classroom last year with the question, “Are you learning, or are you just getting it done?” This sign was the result of a conversation in which students shared the importance of deeper learning in school activities — not just getting good grades. After guiding students through this research process, viewing their passionate presentations, and reading students’ reflections on this experience, I can say with assurance that this was about more than “just getting it done.” The students met and exceeded the Standards by collaborating to create a powerful voice that called attention to issues that mattered to them.



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