

Synthesis of Literacy and Technology Standards

When evaluating the standards of literacy instruction it is important to consider the needs of an individual student. The national standards of literacy instruction and similar standards presented at the state and local level are valuable and insightful guides for teachers and they undoubtedly cover critical areas of need for student instruction. Unfortunately, all students do not fit into the same mold and one set of standards cannot apply universally to all students of all abilities across the nation.

In my classroom, the national standards and local standards are essentially the same. The Diocese of St. Petersburg which oversees Catholic education in the Tampa Bay area has presented all schools and teachers with a list of benchmarks nearly identical to the national literacy standards and teachers work to present material and plan lessons to cover all the standards in any given school year. Unfortunately, just because a teacher presents the necessary material and learning structure does not necessarily mean that students will master the material.

In my school, students are individually rated throughout the school year. Ratings are based on how each student is meeting the individual benchmarks of literacy instruction. For example, Diocesan Standards and Benchmarks Strand B, benchmark number two under the Language category reads, "The student writes to communicate ideas and information effectively". This benchmark reads similarly to national Standards for the English Language Arts number four, "Students adjust their use of spoken, written and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes" The teacher uses a four category rating system to indicate whether or not a student has made "Very Good Progress", "Satisfactory Progress", "Inconsistent Progress", or "Limited Progress." These ratings are exceptionally difficult to apply to students with learning disabilities yet each year, every teacher in my school completes individual benchmarks for every student in every subject area. The rating is extremely subjective, especially when the limitations of an individual student are taken into account.

In the benchmark listed above, how does a teacher quantify effective communication? Should the teacher take age into account or simply rate a student based on his or her academic level? Should a teacher take improvement into account? For example, if a student began the year unable to write in complete sentences they would not be communicating effectively. However if the same student is able to write 3 complete thoughts in paragraph form by the end of the year are they then able to communicate effectively? Have they not made "Very Good Progress"? Would all teachers in the diocese agree with this assessment? Would all teachers in the school even agree? These questions must be considered where universally applied standards are concerned.

Literacy standards undoubtedly serve as an excellent guide. A teacher must be held accountable for providing instruction in the areas described. Teachers must adapt lessons to present material in ways best suitable for students, especially when those students have special learning needs. However the key to evaluating success is to evaluate the individual student. The key to applying any standard, national or local, is to embrace the differences of students and accept that some standards may be met in different ways than the set of standards as a whole allows.

Where technology is concerned, similar ideas apply. Since not all classrooms in a district, state or even school have identical technology resources, technology standards cannot be applied universally. National Educational Technology Standards do however provide an excellent resource for teachers, particularly those who have limited technology proficiency. Whereas all teachers enter a classroom with the ability to read and write, not all teachers are well educated on the use of various technology resources and techniques. This is a growing problem and the standards serve as an excellent guideline for schools to prepare both teachers and students. Decades ago, the three main subject areas were reading, writing and math. Today, a fourth category should be added—technology.

My school does not have technology benchmarks so I do not feel the external pressure from my principal to meet written standards. Instead, I have taken my own measures to insure that my students are prepared by following NET Standards in my own classroom. Unfortunately I have very limited resources to work with however they are enough to make a start. I believe that my technology resources would improve greatly if technology standards were made mandatory across the diocese.

These standards directly influence my instruction in that they provide me again, with a guide for what I need to cover to prepare my students. Each year, a major project for all upper elementary and middle school students in my school is to write, prepare and present a speech. This project reverts back to many of the literacy standards including Strand B.2 on writing to communicate effectively. It also covers vast areas of NET standards because students use the Internet for research on their chosen topic. Students do not simply enter a search term, click on the first available page, print the material and copy it on to their paper despite the fact that this is the path many would prefer to take! The process of speech writing begins with instruction on how to evaluate Internet resources, how to look for bias, how to check facts by looking at many different resources and most importantly, how to take the information discovered and apply proper credit to the author. Students must plan their process of research and writing. They also must determine how to find the best information. Sometimes the best information is not found on the Internet if a student can interview a family member or visit a location instead. In most instances, the Internet provides all the necessary information. Finally, after research and writing, students must navigate the word processor to type, and edit the speech. This process takes approximately two months and occurs largely in the classroom.

Standards in Literacy and Technology provide strong direction for teachers but should not be considered the only method of providing effective instruction. While speeches do take up a huge chunk of literacy instructional time, they meet so many specific literacy and technology standards it is well worth the devotion of time and effort. More important than meeting standards, it provides students with a tremendous sense of accomplishment when they have completed their speech and presented it before judges. The students are not aware of the standards they have met. Standards are not a motivating factor for them. Students are better served by feeling the intrinsic motivation of proud accomplishment than being able to place a check in a standards box.