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Razing the Standards: Building and Implementing a Linguistically Informed K-12 Curriculum in a Climate of Ignorance

Kristin Denham

Western Washington University

Anne Lobeck

Western Washington University

Michal Temkin Martinez

Boise State University

Jean Mulder

University of Melbourne

David Pippin

St. Thomas School, Medina, WA

See next page for additional authors

Authors

Kristin Denham, Anne Lobeck, Michal Temkin Martinez, Jean Mulder, David Pippin, Jeff Reaser, and Graeme Trousdale

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Grand Ballroom 3

3:30 – 5:00 PM

- Organizers: Sharon Klein (California State University, Northridge)
Jean Ann (State University of New York, Oswego)
- Sponsor: LSA Language in the School Curriculum Committee (LiSC)
- Participants: Kristin Denham (Western Washington University)
Anne Lobeck (Western Washington University)
Michal Temkin Martinez (Boise State University)
Jean Mulder (University of Melbourne)
David Pippin (St. Thomas School, Medina, WA)
Jeff Reaser (North Carolina State University)
Graeme Trousdale (University of Edinburgh)

Language study in K-12 settings should provide a platform for children to develop an awareness of language and its nature; their natural curiosity is well-documented. But in the context of the standards movement, standards set for “the language arts” in the schools neither encourage nor engender such development.

Although not alone in such a disciplinary decline—in both general knowledge and the failure to distinguish between ideology and understanding (see, e.g., Battistella 2010)—the news from linguistics seems bleaker. As Mark Liberman noted in his 2007 LSA address, “The current state of ignorance about language among intellectuals is historically unprecedented, functionally maladaptive, and contrary to human nature.”

But even with some efforts to bring the study of language into K-12 classrooms, the nature of the language arts curriculum in schools continues to be defined by standards typically reflecting neither knowledge of, or interest in treating language as an object of inquiry, or in building on the small successes that linguists have had toward this end, working both with children and their K-12 teachers.

And insofar the voices behind the Common Core Standards (<http://www.corestandards.org/>), are deemed “the language arts experts,” the result is predictable: a set of standards that defines the territory of language as fundamentally usage conventions and vocabulary. And it is such standards that determine how programs are funded and how teachers are prepared. The National Governors’ Association (NGA) Common Core Standards are, moreover, not the first encounter we’ve had with impoverished treatments of language.

In the past, however, we have largely ignored the collective poverty of such standards and have considered the creation of test items and the testing enterprise in general as “noise,” confident that our own respective research programs and the teaching we do at colleges and universities were independent of and unscathed by such pursuits. But in fact, we do need to take the standards seriously and respond to them.

This LiSC sponsored session provides a collective linguistic educational manifesto of sorts, and thus a serious, explicit, and systematic response to the gauntlet the recently approved standards present. While there have been curricular initiatives in the direction of well-designed programs that would provide young children with the opportunity to develop an informed and rational disposition toward language, there has been little public discussion of either the full design or implementation of such curriculum, from a range of perspectives.

Friday, 7 January

Symposium

The range of presenters' work in this session does this, addressing curriculum both for K-12 classrooms—providing the foundation for sustained inquiry about language—and for teachers preparing for, or already in such classrooms, so that they can encourage, as well as respond, to children's curiosity and inquiry: a desirable outcome in any discipline. Importantly, we welcome critical voices and experiences from both Great Britain and Australia.

The session also seeks to engender discussion about the issues raised and the possibility for collaborative and sustained responses.

Kristin Denham (Western Washington University)

Anne Lobeck (Western Washington University)

Linguistics beyond the language arts

Introducing new curriculum into K-12 education is no easy task. However, one way to get a foot in the door is to connect the curriculum to standards in several disciplines. In line with these standards, we are developing a middle school curriculum on World Language, organized by linguistic subfield, targeting four linguistic areas: Indigenous languages of the Americas, languages of Africa, languages of Asia, and languages of Europe (including English). Entry-level problems will contain tightly-constrained data, and guide students in using scientific methodology. In this presentation, we explain how we tie our web-based linguistics curriculum to national standards; show how it will help teachers meet their required benchmarks; discuss our reasons for focusing on middle school; show how to integrate the curriculum into various kinds of classrooms; and illustrate its cost-effectiveness in contrast to other science curricula.

Michal Temkin Martínez (Boise State University)

Going beyond the Common Core Standards: Training future linguists and K-12 teachers

In this talk, I will discuss three issues linguists should consider in implementing the Common Core Standards for K-12 education. First, I will outline issues absent from the Common Core Standards that the LSA Linguistics in the School Curriculum Committee considers essential to address. These include non-native language learning, linguistic variation, and language awareness. I will then discuss ways of incorporating these issues into the linguistic training of future K-12 teachers and will present sample course materials from an introductory course in linguistics for teachers. Lastly, I will respond to Mark Liberman's call to linguists in his 2007 LSA plenary address, discussing the importance of incorporating graduate student training in the area of linguistic pedagogy for the purpose of educating non-linguists, especially in the area of K-12 instruction.

Jean Mulder (University of Melbourne)

Returning to grammar in the school curriculum: An Australian perspective

In Australia, the recently released K–12 National Curriculum for English embraces not only a return to the explicit teaching of grammar with a commitment to teaching it in context but also includes a distinct strand of knowledge about language. The paper begins with a synopsis of the broader understandings of language encoded in these documents, illustrating one approach toward providing a more linguistically informed awareness of language. This is followed by a critical assessment of the grammatical framework, showing it is based on 'traditional' grammar rather than a modern linguistic approach. It is argued that while academic linguists for the most part have not engaged with the challenge of elaborating an approach to grammar that is relevant to the needs of students and draws on the insights of modern linguistics, it is critical that we do. The paper concludes by outlining key issues in developing such an approach.

Jeff Reaser (North Carolina State University)

A brief history of Core Standard development in American education

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) is one of the most substantial reassessments of the English Language Arts curriculum ever in the US. Such a moment offers linguists an opportunity to help drive discussions of educational curricula as opposed to reacting to enacted policy. To better understand the CCSSI, this talk offers a brief history of the national standards movement and related trends in education over the past 150 years. Familiarity with the historical context should help linguists better understand how their voices can become a part of the upcoming conversations related to implementation and assessment of these standards. This talk offers a beginning toward understanding this history of standards and educational trends and how linguists may use this opportunity to reinvigorate informed language study in K-12 classrooms.

Graeme Trousdale (University of Edinburgh)

Knowledge about language in British schools: Some recent developments

In this talk, I discuss ways in which academic linguists working in Britain have been involved in promoting knowledge about language (KAL) in British school education systems. Specifically, the presentation will focus on the following themes: curricular reform, developing residential courses in linguistics, and working with teachers. Under the topic of curricular reform, I present an overview of ways in which Advanced Level qualifications in English have been revised to allow KAL to be explicitly taught and assessed. The second part of the talk is concerned with a residential course on linguistics for gifted and talented schoolchildren, and some on-going collaborative work between teachers and linguists. The talk will conclude with some discussion of the work of the United Kingdom Linguistics Olympiad committee. Throughout the talk, I emphasize the ways in which the specific developments in Britain might be tailored to education systems in other parts of the world.