English Faculty Publications and Presentations

Department of English

How Educators Use Policy Documents: A Misunderstood Relationship

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As an English educator and co-director of a National Writing Project site, I have had many conversations with colleagues and educators who are anxious about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) being adopted in so many states throughout the nation. The anxiety comes in many forms, ranging from "What do the CCSS mean for what and how I have to teach?" to "What does the drafting and implementation processes of the CCSS suggest for how people view me as a professional?" to "Are the CCSS really any good?" and so on. As I listen to all the people I work with—preservice teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators, curriculum coordinators, writing project directors and fellows—I keep returning to one major issue that I think is behind a lot of the concern. More specifically, I continue to wonder how educators actually use and develop policy documents (e.g., standards) in their day-to-day work. The assumption seems to be that teachers read the policies and then implement them; however, any teacher who has worked with standards documents knows that this process isn't quite as clear-cut as the above assumption. It is this gap between how assumptions about educators use policy documents and how teachers actually use those policy documents. I sense this is the source for a lot of the anxiety I hear in the voices of the many educators I respect and work with. I think Thomas Hatch (2005) describes the issue succinctly when he writes:

> The failure to recognize and build on the knowledge that teachers develop over the course of their careers grows out a set of assumptions about the nature of teaching and the work of teachers. Many conventional approaches to teaching and supporting teachers function as if teaching were a relatively simple process in which teachers deliver information to students and provide opportunities for them to practice and master basic skills. In such a conception, the emphasis for teachers is on delivering curriculum, not on developing it. Teachers are only seen as being "on task" when they are working with students in the classroom–not when they reflect on their practice, discuss it with their colleagues, or prepare articles about it. Consequently, teachers receive relatively little institutional support and recognition for contributing to the production of the knowledge and understandings that they need to be effective. (p. 2)

Ann Arbor public school teacher, Jeff Taylor, made a similar case to me in a conversation at a National Writing Project (NWP) event. He said that educators face debilitating pressure to 'deliver' a curriculum and pointed out that curriculum is not a pizza and children do not like all the same toppings. So, how he asked, do we give students a made-to-order entrée in a cookie-cutter teaching world?

To Hatch and to Taylor, those who don't teach (and maybe even some who do teach) misunderstand how teachers do their work of designing instruction, assessing student performance, and conversing with colleagues. In turn, those who don't teach may misunderstand the role policy documents play when teachers engage in those practices of designing, assessing, and conversing. Finally, those who don't teach may hold a view of teaching and learning that is one of information-transmission, which results in the idea that teachers are simply delivering knowledge, rather than developing it. These views have consequences for teachers and, perhaps more importantly, consequences for students.

The purpose of this essay is to meet the call language and literacy professor Glynda Hull (1997) made well over a decade ago when she wrote, "We need to look with a critical eye at how work gets accomplished and to examine what roles literacy plays within work as well as the relationship between skills at work and the rights of workers" (p. xv). Although Hull was not writing about educators, in this time of increasing public scrutiny of and public debate about teachers, I think it is worth considering teachers' literacy practices, such as how they engage in reading, composing, and conversing when they design instruction and assess learning. In particular, focusing on the role that policy documents, like the Common Core Standards, play in that process might also provide a way to educate the public about our work as educators as well as offer up

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some new possibilities for how professional development opportunities are structured to support both the work that teachers do and the learning that can occur when engaging in such practices. Although the essay here will not address everything I outlined, I believe it can at least start the conversation–a conversation that I hope positions educators as the professionals we are.

Some Work Activities of Educators: An Illustration

This past academic year, I have been working with a small group of teachers who are fellows in the Boise State Writing Project (BSWP). Sponsored by a NWP grant (funded by the Gates Foundation), the focus for the group of six teachers has been to develop curriculum for their high school English classrooms that meets two requirements: (1) it is aligned with

the group's belief in teaching through an inquiry approach (by which we mean that students pursue overarching questions together as teachers model, mentor, and monitor the reading, composing, researching, etc. that are needed to accomplish the host of literacy tasks needed to answer those questions), (2) it is aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Each teacher in the project designed her or his own unit of study, but the deliverable from the group was a template of sorts to help make visible the reasons behind their pedagogical choices and to help make visible the kind of features they would be looking for in their students' work processes. Although we will write more about this work in future occasions, I mention our work here to illustrate how the standards documents themselves were present at the initial stage of the designing process (i.e., the standards provided a framework of sorts), but then the document was largely forgotten until the group had drafted their units. In other words, the standards document worked as a prewriting and a refining tool, depending on the stage of the composing process. To be sure, this is largely an anecdotal reference for one group of teachers; however, it raises the question of how teachers actually use policy documents.

The standards seem to be used to inform others about why a teacher's classroom practice or curriculum is legitimate and appropriate.

My work with the BSWP group and the questions it has raised for me has reminded me of a project I worked on with the Writing in Digital Environment Research Center (WIDE) at Michigan State University (MSU) a few years ago when I was a graduate student. The project was commissioned by the Teachers for a New Era (TNE) initiative in the teacher education department at MSU. Our charge was to understand how teachers and teacher educators used standards, any standards, in their day-to-day work so that when TNE presented their new teacher education standards to its stakeholders, those standards would be packaged and presented in a way that supported the work everyone had to do as stakeholders in the teacher education program. At the time, TNE leaders had recently written standards for the teacher education department, and the purpose of the study was to find a way to present those standards to the stakeholders in the teacher education program in ways that were both visible and useful for those stakeholders. In other words, TNE leaders wanted to know how teachers used standards in order to figure out a way to deliver and package their standards so that teachers did in fact use the standards, rather than "leaving them on the shelf."

Briefly, the WIDE research team interviewed 24 stakeholders in the teacher education program who focused on teaching literacy. This included faculty in three departments (Teacher Education, English and Writing Rhetoric, and American Cultures), graduate students, undergraduate students, and mentor teachers who worked in area schools. The interviews were conducted at the workplace for each of the participants, and each session was audiotaped. The interviewers also took notes during the interviews. The protocol for the interview was based on contextual inquiry (Holtzblatt, Wendell, & Wood,

2005), which asks participants to demonstrate how they do their work, while providing interviewers with opportunities to ask questions as the participant did their work. Much like a think-aloud protocol teachers use when they model reading or writing strategies for students, the contextual inquiry protocol allowed each interviewer to meet with other members of the research team to find themes and patterns across each of the interviews. For some processes that participants could not perform with the interviewer present, such as during a three-way conference between a mentor teacher, a university supervisor, and a student teacher, the participants offered a retrospective account of the process, which allowed similar opportunities for researchers to ask questions about the process and, in particular, the role that standards documents played in the process.

As a result of the findings of the project, WIDE developed SWAP, a literacy resource exchange digital platform, which offered stakeholders to "tag" different work products (e.g., lesson plans, assignment sheets, rubrics, etc.) to the different standards. That is, people in the exchange could search for different kinds of documents by standards, by user, or by kind of document. While SWAP was not taken up as part of the regular practice of the stakeholders for this group, the findings of the study can illustrate how educators use standards documents as a genre to facilitate their work, particularly in their work practices of designing instruction, assessing learning, and conversing with colleagues.

Planning and Designing Instruction

While standards documents might influence the framework of a course, such as a literature course being organized by genre, literary period, or theme, the WIDE research team found that teachers also used standards in their day-to-day planning in particular ways. For instance, one veteran teacher described her planning process this way:

1. Begin with identifying the specific student outcomes

2. Create assessments that will help describe students' performance in relation to those outcomes

3. Design classroom activities that allow students to practice that performance and provide him/her with opportunities to give students feedback on that performance

4. Consider all the possible standards associated with these experiences

5. Decide which of those standards she wants to fore ground

In this teacher's planning process, she does not begin with standards, rather she uses them to link her classroom practice to some larger professional body, such as the state's standards for her subject matter and grade level.

Similarly, in one of the program's teacher education courses, students are asked to select a young adult novel they would want their students to read. After they have chosen a novel, they are sent to the Department of Education's website, asked to locate the language arts content standards, and told to "find a standard" that "supports" the inclusion of their chosen text.

One interviewee chose the standard "Students should read a diverse set of authors/texts" as a way to justify her choice. Like the more experienced teacher, this prospective teacher is asked to locate standards at the end of a planning experience. In another teacher education course, prospective teachers are asked to design a series of lessons for a "unit plan." Within both the daily and unit lessons, these prospective teachers are asked to include standards—either state standards or NCTE standards in either the "rationale" or "objectives" section of the planning documents they create. The teacher assigning this project asks her students to consider the inclusion of standards as something that they could "hand to parents to explain why you're doing what you're doing."

These planning experiences reveal one way that standards help teachers do their work, namely to link their ideas to larger entities (i.e., state department of education, national professional organization) in order to justify their curricular choices. When standards are used in this way, they do not seem to be guiding teachers' day-to-day decisions. That is, the policy documents—standards documents—do not solely inform teachers about what they might do in their classroom. Those decisions seem to be based on something else. Instead, the standards seem to be used to inform others about why a teacher's classroom practice or curriculum is legitimate and appropriate. Thus, part of the work of teachers is to explain to others what it is they are doing in their classroom and why they are doing it in the way that they are doing it. Standards provide them with both the language and the institutional weight to articulate these choices, but they do not seem to affect the choices themselves—at least not in day-to-day planning. It is in this way that standards documents aid teachers in communicating with others about what happens in their classroom. Educators develop their curriculum, and standards are one of many resources used in the process. Certainly, more research on what those resources might include, and perhaps more importantly, how those resources work together to facilitate teachers' decision-making would prove beneficial.

Assessing and Evaluating Student Teachers

Since WIDE researched the stakeholders of a teacher preparation program, one central activity stakeholders mentioned was the evaluation of teaching interns. At the time of the WIDE study, MSU's teacher education program used four standards to evaluate teaching interns (student teachers): knowing subject matters and how to teach them, working with students, creating and managing a classroom learning community, and, working and learning in a school and profession. Interns were formally evaluated four times during their year-long student teaching— at the middle and end of each semester—during three-way conferences that include the intern, the mentor teacher, and the field instructor. The participants we interviewed noted several ways in which they used standards documents during these meetings, including knowing what to look for during an intern's teaching performance, addressing problems of professional conduct, addressing issues of classroom management, focusing an intern's attention on a particular part of their practice, and using the standards as warrants and/or evidence for a particular evaluation. Moreover, the standards document served as a way for

mentors and field instructors to distance themselves from the critique they provided for the interns. One field instructor paraphrased the situation, "I'm not saying it's a problem, but what you need to do is right here in the rubric." It's in this way that the standards document serves as a way to buffer potential problems between the intern and either the mentor or field instructor. That is, the critique comes from the document rather than from the more experienced mentor or field instructor.

> The conversation the standards documents spawn seem necessary, because while the documents may spell out what it means to meet a certain standard, we all may have our own language or way of understanding it.

These critiques seem to stem from problems that the intern is having. That is, the critiques seem to focus on practices that the intern could improve upon, and the standards document serves as a way to articulate those concerns without seeming to be personal critiques. One field instructor describes what she would say to an intern who is not showing up to school on time. She reports saying something like "I cannot tolerate your being late…see standard four." In a move like this, the standards document allows the field instructor to shift the topic from his/ her criticism to the larger institution(s) that the document represents. Thus, the source of criticism shifts from an individual person (field instructor) to an institution (teacher education program).

It is telling, however, that of the four teaching standards this program uses to evaluate interns, one standard was mentioned repeatedly throughout our interviews, namely classroom management. That is, our interviewees rarely mentioned how they evaluated interns' knowledge of subject matter, and they tended to note how the standards could be used as a way to focus, as one field instructor said, an intern's attention on a problem s/he might be having, such as "not engaging students, not forming a classroom learning community, having trouble managing fidgety students."

While some field instructors and mentor teachers might use—as one mentor teacher noted—the standards document for interns to self-assess their performance and set goals, even this process seems to focus on what interns are not doing well. It's in this way that standards might be used to "show how people are failing," as one mentor put it, "not how they are succeeding."

Because our interviewees tended to focus on one of the standards, the standards document appears not to help field instructors or mentor teacher to prioritize the standards. That is, the standards aim to help describe the performance of interns, but after noting how well interns manage students, the other standards seem ambiguous or equally weighted. It's unclear from our interviews what the case might be. Nonetheless, standards documents seem to focus the kinds of observations field instructors and mentor teachers make; however, in terms of evaluating interns, interviewees seem uncertain about how the

standards describe an intern's performance. That is, the standards help evaluators know what to look for, but not what those performances might look like at different stages. Many of our interviewers note that this ambiguity is often the genesis for their conversations with one another. In other words, the standards document is used as a source and a location to generate conversation between members of the program.

Conversing with Colleagues

One of the challenges facing any teacher education program is that the participants in the program have multiple institutional "homes" or contexts, including professional organizations, school districts, and local communities. Thus, part of any work a teacher in a teacher education program must perform is crossing and navigating multiple institutional boundaries. According to many we interviewed, standards documents serve as one way to cross these boundaries. One mentor teacher reports that using standards within her building is a way for her and her colleagues to talk about what they're doing in their classrooms.

One faculty member at the university envisions standards as a way to bring together mentor teachers from many different school districts. This faculty member uses standards as a way for this group of mentor teachers to create a sense of identity, create a set of tools and language to use, and to "start a conversation within a group."

One field instructor uses standards as a way to help him and the mentors with whom he works to "use the same language." And, another mentor teacher uses the standards as a "discussion guide" between her and her intern. In all of these instances, the standards and standards documents act—as one field instructor put it—as "a fourth party."

In all of these instances, the conversation the standards documents spawn seem necessary, because "while the documents may spell out what it means to meet a certain standard," one field instructor says, "we all may have our own language or way of understanding it." Thus, in the very real and practical task of communicating one's notions of what it means for an intern to be performing well, the standards documents serve as a kind of resource for participants in the program to turn to in order to initiate conversations. In addition to initiating these discussions, standards documents also seem to help participants navigate disagreements.

For instance, when two parties (e.g., the mentor teacher and the field instructor) disagree about the kind of teaching experiences an intern should be having, more than one field instructor points out that the standards document permits them an "out." In one anecdote, for example, one field instructor believed an intern's facilitation of whole-class discussion was too teacher-centered and that the line of questioning relied too heavily on "yes/no" responses from students. The mentor teacher, a teacher who reportedly favored such a style and structure to discussion, disagreed with the field instructor. In order to alleviate the situation, the field instructor pointed out descriptors within one of the standards that encouraged interns to use multiple approaches to classroom structures and conversations. The field instructor reports that s/he felt the standards gave him/her "leverage" and "took the heat off" him/her.

Policies to Implement Versus Policies to Support the Work of Teachers

As I think about the Common Core Standards and the anxious reactions of the many teachers I work with throughout Idaho, I wonder how I might help those teachers see how they already use policy documents in their work. I see these teachers as creators, composers, and developers, and as such, I wonder how I might help them become more strategic and reflective about their processes of designing instruction, assessing learning, and conversing about their professional decision-making with others. The scholarship on "policy implementation" does not seem to allow for this view, or for the view that the people who use policies make meaning of those policies while engaging in the work that those policies are intended to alter in some way.

More specifically, McLaughlin (1987) long ago described three different generations or views of policy implementation. The first view of policy is focused on programs and program outcomes, rather than on those implementing the program. The second generation viewed the relationship between policies and individuals as one of bargaining that changes over time as "policy resources, problems, and objectives evolve and are played against a dynamic institutional setting" (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 175). The third view began to focus on the contexts in which policies were implemented by focusing on how macro and micro levels of analysis could inform one another.

I offer these views for two reasons. First, when educators discuss policies with other stakeholders, the other stakeholders might understand policy implementation from one or more of the "generations" that McLaughlin outlines. Second, McLaughlin's generations do not take into account a more recent school of thought that suggests that policy documents are members of a constellation of genres and resources that teachers draw from to design instruction, to assess learning, and to converse with colleagues.

As an example of this kind of view of professional documents, Tardy (2003) examines how academics composing grant proposals do not do that work in isolation. Tardy finds that not only do grant writers interact with different types of texts, but they must also have knowledge about different discourse communities, which, in this case, includes the academic professional community, colleagues, the principal investigator's academic institution, the program officer, the government funding agency, and the U.S. government. It is in this way that genre systems play "an intermediate role between institutional structural properties and individual communicative action" (Berkenkotter, 2001, p. 329). At the end of her piece, Tardy writes that her data suggests—what might also be said of educators working with standards—that:

> Grant writing is fundamentally a social practice that is inextricably linked to a network of other genres; that the intertextual networks of the genre system serve to navigate writers through that system and to build the writers' knowledge of the system; and that knowledge of a genre system may differ in important ways from knowledge of an isolated genre. (pp. 32-33)

In this view, when teachers use policy documents they are engaged in a social practice that is linked to a network of re-

sources and communities, and in being linked, teachers are contributing back to that network. That is, they are not simply transmitting information to students, nor are they simply translating the policy; instead, they are building knowledge as they compose. Just as when writing teachers help their students see that writing is not just a process of demonstrating knowledge, it is a process for also discovering knowledge; so too is it true when teachers use policy documents.

Supporting Educators' Work Practices

To be sure, in many schools and districts, teachers are unable (or not trusted) to design curriculum to meet the needs of their own students. For instance, here in Idaho the idea of "fidelity" to a scripted curriculum and program causes great angst for many of the elementary teachers I work with in various districts. Moreover, in districts and schools where teachers are trusted to develop and rely on their professional expertise to develop curriculum, it is less common for the teachers to talk to one another about their process of designing instruction or about their process of making pedagogical decisions. My hope is that by identifying teachers' work practices, making those practices visible, and being more explicit about the teachers' decision-making processes within those practices, educators of all stripes can be more intentional and strategic when talking with others about why they do what they do in their work.

Perhaps this is an unsatisfactory or an incomplete objective for those teachers who are already working in contexts that do not support their learning or acknowledge their expertise, though I do hope it offers a possible next step to take in changing those circumstances. If educators and policy makers understand that teachers use policy documents in ways that inform their designing of instruction, their assessing of learning, and their conversing with others, and if we understand that policy documents are just one resource within a larger web of resources teachers draw from, then I wonder how we can: (1) help others share our understanding and (2) help teachers use policy documents in a way that is empowering to them. Below I outline a handful of suggestions that I hope trigger a conversation.

First, educators, researchers, and policymakers could consider widening the description of teachers' work to include more than student-teacher interactions in the classroom so that it includes the central practices of teaching, such as designing instruction, assessing, and conversing. When considering what is taught and how it is taught in their classrooms, teachers engage in a wide range of activities that rely on a host of resources, such as policy documents. Previous policy implementation analyses tend to focus solely on teachers' classroom practices, and widening the scope of what constitutes teachers' work would seem to open up new possibilities for the ways in which other stakeholders consider how policies might affect teachers' thinking, decisions, knowledge, and, ultimately, their teaching practices.

Second, those who lead professional development opportunities could identify and target particular work activities in which teachers might use policy documents to support that work. That is, interacting with policy documents does not happen in isolation, nor does it happen for the sake of interaction. Instead, teachers and teacher educators seem to rely on standards to help them for their own purposes. Moreover, in trying to achieve these purposes, teachers use a wide range of resources of which policy documents are one. Work activities that seem particularly promising include planning lessons and assessing others. In both activities, educators turn to standards documents for assistance in articulating purposes and goals. The language of standards then appear in other documents that are products of this work, namely lesson plans and assessment documentation.

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Third, educational researchers (including teacher researchers) could analyze the products or outcomes of these work activities in order to identify the role that policy documents play in these outcomes. Teachers, for example, use standards documents to assist them as they explain to parents why particular classroom practices are in place. Analyzing the way in which teachers use standards in these conversations might provide new ways of organizing or conceptualizing policy documents. For example, a standards document might not only include the standard itself, but it might also include hypothetical situations in which a teacher is explaining her practice to a parent. Such a narrative might provide teachers with a new understanding of how standards might help them articulate their decisions to others.

Fourth, all stakeholders could treat standards and other policy documents as ways to do work, rather than as documentation. Teachers' work is demanding and complicated, and teachers will find ways to accomplish their work. Policy documents have the possibility of being one way by which that work could be accomplished. That is, if other stakeholders want to encourage teachers to work in particular ways, then it would serve them well to present and organize their documents in ways that help teachers work in those ways. Teachers do not simply interpret or implement policy. They use it to support their work.

Fifth, educators, researchers, and administrators could identify and analyze the ways in which teachers leave traces of their knowledge in the documents they create, such as in unit plans, lesson plans, rubrics, letters to parents, etc. It seems clear that teachers make choices about how to present their knowledge in the documents they produce. Understanding what knowledge teachers decide to include in their documents and identifying the way in which they present that knowledge might help policy makers foreground particular conceptions of teaching knowledge or practice that they hope to influence.

In closing, I am reminded of a kind of conversation I seem to have with other teachers. The conversation typically starts with me asking about the unit they have designed, and then the teachers tells me about. Since I'm curious about the deci-

sions teachers make, I usually ask them about the choices they made in the design and about the choices they think they will have to make when they work with students. Inevitably, the conversation leads to me asking the teachers whether or not they see themselves as writers. The answer is almost universally, "No. I don't see myself as a writer when I'm writing up my units."

The first several times I heard this reply I was baffled because the person just described a host of rhetorical and pedagogical decisions which included gathering and drawing from a host of ideas and resources, drafting plans, considering the needs of the primary "audience" (i.e., students), considering the demands of the secondary "audience" (e.g., colleagues, administrators, parents), and anticipating revisions once the plans are shared with others. Teachers are composers, and as such, their relationship with policy documents is one in which teachers do not simply deliver policies, rather they develop policies as they work with students and colleagues. Understanding this relationship just might help as teachers enter into a relationship with the Common Core State Standards and as curriculum coordinators and administrators organize time and opportunities for teachers to do the work of designing instruction, assessing learning, and conversing with one another about the work that lies ahead of them.

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Michigan Council of Teachers of English
Teachers for the Dream

The MCTE Teachers for the Dream program pairs English Language Arts pre-service and in-service teachers-of-color with professional mentors to work on preparing conference presentations and/or publication submissions. Additionally, participants are granted free MCTE membership and subsidized attendance at a conference.

Teachers for the Dream is also seeking established professionals to serve as mentors. Right now, there are three new Dreamers waiting to be paired with mentors. To launch mentees into professional scholarship, many mentors have presented with their mentees. When not using that avenue, many mentors have helped participants use course work projects or thesis research to create their professional work. Mentors with existing relationship to nominees are welcome and encouraged.

To nominate a Teacher for the Dream or to volunteer, please contact:

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