CHAPTER 13

UnCommon Connections

How Building a Grass-Roots Curriculum Helped Reframe Common Core State Standards for Teachers and Students in a High-Needs Public High School

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A one-medium user is the new illiterate. (Zingrone 2001, 237)

Equipping students to write in only one mode—traditionally, black ink on white paper in scripted genres—will not serve students in their higher education experiences or in the workplaces of the future. (National Writing Project [NWP] with DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, and Hicks 2010, 5)

Use technology, including the internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information. (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO] and National Governors Association [NGA] 2010, W.11–12.6)

Without a doubt, the teacher who carefully reads the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will discover that something feels different from previous outcome articulation documents. While the CCSS themselves are not necessarily more complex or sophisticated than previous local or state standards, they articulate those standards in ways that can seem alien or off-putting, both because there are so many standards and because the discourse around them has involved more talking *around* or *at* teachers than *with* them. Further complicating the issue, some standards focus on actual outcomes, while others focus more on micromanaging classroom activities and teacher practices than on measurable outcomes (or standards) of student learning. As teacher-educators, we have worried significantly about how we should begin approaching the CCSS with both pre- and in-service teachers, as well as how we might help experienced teachers to understand and, if possible, engage these new standards critically and professionally.

One element of the CCSS that we have been excited to see is a concern for 21st-century digital literacies. Having worked for years on local, state, and national professional development projects centered on digital literacies, we see the CCSS as a space where English Language Arts (ELA) teachers should be encouraged to integrate new literacy practices throughout the curriculum in order to engage learners in more meaningful ways than previous standards and educational policies have allowed. Standards like Anchor Standard for Writing 6, which focuses on using "technology" for writing, gesture toward a more collaborative, digitally aware curriculum (CCSSO and NGA 2010, 18).

In part, our thinking on new literacies has been influenced by researchers like Henry Jenkins and colleagues who argue in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* (2006) that "Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement. The new literacies almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking" (4). While these networks in previous generations were interpersonal and hyperlocal, the networks that Jenkins and colleagues' work has explored are built on the awareness that tomorrow's (and even today's) networks are global

and intercultural. As such, it is not enough simply to have two students from the same class swap papers for peer review; young composers need spaces to think about their work in terms of how various networks—from the hyperlocal to the global—might impact writing, from invention and exploration to production, from research and discovery to design and delivery (see Chapter 5 in this volume for an extended look at connections between Jenkins and the CCSS).

In order to explore more fully the intersections of the CCSS, "best practices" in the teaching of writing, and student experiences with digital media, the Tar River Writing Project partnered with a local high school on a grant-funded initiative to help rebuild the school's "Graduation Project" from the ground up as a "born-digital" project aimed at addressing the writing standards of the CCSS and serving, for the most part, as the primary writing curriculum for senior English (English IV). This chapter explores how we developed this project, in conjunction with teachers, media specialists, and students at the high school, as a grass-roots response to the new standards. We argue that teachers, like any group of professionals, both want and need to have some degree of agency in the construction of the curriculum that they teach, an agency that is far too often denied them in the current educational climate. Likewise, we demonstrate that students benefit from being involved in the creation of a new curriculum. Ultimately, we provide a rationale for why teachers and students should be allowed space and time for engaging the CCSS, a rationale that brings these standards into conversation with other equally important standards for literacy and learning.

Historicizing Old Connections

The Tar River Writing Project (TRWP) and J. H. Rose High School (JHR), both located in eastern North Carolina, have forged a connection by working on several projects over the years. Through TRWP summer institutes, we've come to know, value, and support the 21st-century literacy work that strong teacher-leaders at JHR have been doing in their classrooms long before the CCSS were even a blip

on the North Carolina education radar. As a high-needs high school in eastern North Carolina, with a racially and economically diverse population of students, JHR teachers and students have their fair share of successes and challenges. Despite JHR's colloquial reputation as the region's flagship public school because of its geographical positioning inside the region's only micropolitan area, as well as its community reputation, diverse curricular offerings, and award-winning band and athletic programs, JHR has struggled with racial parity and a higher than average dropout rate. In addition, JHR has struggled to graduate its lower-achieving students, and increasing its graduation rate is a top priority for the school over the next few years.

To address the high drop-out rate that plagued each of its six high schools including JHR, the Pitt County School District voted in 2012 to abolish the mandate that all seniors must complete and score satisfactorily on a tightly conscripted research project, one managed and taught as a major element of the state's pre-CCSS English IV curriculum. The former Graduation Project required students to find a project mentor in the school or community, work with him or her to complete 20 hours of carefully documented work on a physical project that would teach the student something new, write a five- to eight-page researched academic essay on a topic loosely connected to that physical project, and prepare and deliver a 10-minute oral report with a visual accompaniment that demonstrated the physical project to a group of judges from the school and the community. Citing the difficulty many students, especially those who are already underresourced and underachieving, had in finding mentors, arranging transportation to complete the work, producing an error-free five- to eight-page academic argument during the course of one semester, and learning effective oral and visual communication skills, the school board dropped the system-wide requirement, effective for the 2012–2013 academic year.

This action sent a conflicting message to many secondary ELA teachers in the district as some felt they were being asked to lower their expectations while at the same time prepare to meet the new CCSS with rigor and relevance. One of our JHR colleagues has called this conundrum the "fancy dance" of public education, a representation of the complex work that professional educators have to do when faced with conflicting imperatives to provide access to education to all students while simultaneously being the "standard bearers" of education.

While many of the former Graduation Project demands did seem like undue burdens, the principal at JHR and a few of the school's teacher-leaders, some already connected with TRWP, recognized the value of a capstone project that could provide authentic writing and research experiences for both college- and career-track students. Thus, they called on TRWP to help enact a space in which English IV teachers could conceptualize a curriculum that promotes (1) authentic inquiry, (2) experiential learning, and (3) making and doing—in short, a curriculum that provides rich literacy instruction with embedded opportunities to read, write, speak, and listen in both virtual and face-to-face environments. While the former Graduation Project had been designed with college-bound honors students in mind, JHR school leadership wanted to invest in a project that could meet the needs of multiple student groups, conceptualizing literacy as a tool for success and empowerment as opposed to a sorting device for social stratification around which we must, as John Trimbur (1991) argues, periodically create a crisis.

Imagining New Connections

David Barton and Mary Hamilton (1998), in articulating the new literacies that will play a key role in students' lives in the 21st century, argue that:

> Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people. (3)

Likewise, as Kathleen Blake Yancey reminded the audience during her Chair's Address to the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication, to teach new literacies requires new strategies, to move away from old models and old logics of teaching writing. To collaboratively develop a new logic that would operate in the English IV classroom, teacher-leaders at TRWP and JHR convened for one week during the summer of 2012 to explore collaboratively the CCSS for writing as well as the MacArthur Foundation's Connected Learning Principles (2011) and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (Framework), jointly authored by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the NWP (2011).

While JHR teachers had some familiarity with the CCSS for writing, none had had an opportunity to explore the textures of writing and teaching in a networked world, an inquiry that is taken up in the Principles. Built on Jenkins's (2006) concept of participatory cultures, the Principles (MacArthur Foundation 2011) work to articulate and showcase how teachers and schools can design student-centered learning experiences that harness the power of networked digital technologies to support learning for academic, economic, and social achievement. While the Principles position students as makers and collaborators, focusing on the act of doing with others in community, the Framework focuses on individual habits of mind that can be cultivated through a rich writing education (see also Chapters 4, 5, and 6 in this volume). Authored by educators representing our most reputable professional organizations, these habits of mind include curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. These are habits that research into writing studies has identified as crucial to the practice of writing (and thinking) well in higher education. Taken separately, these materials provide a limited understanding of "doing digital" in writing classrooms, but taken together, these three approaches provide a theory of action and a practical vision for how student-centered writing pedagogy might operate in an ELA classroom.

We developed our initial leadership team out of existing professional partnerships that had developed among the following people:

- JHR's Digital and Print Media teacher from the Career and Technical Education Department
- JHR's Instructional Coach with ELA teaching experience and a writing studies background
- A college-level writing instructor and doctoral student in Rhetoric, Writing, and Professional Communication

All three teacher-leaders had completed the TRWP Summer Institute and were active teacher consultants with the NWP. But we knew we had to build new connections to prevent this initiative from being seen as the pet project of a few insiders. To build those connections, we invited two of JHR's English IV teachers: one, the former Graduation Project coordinator, and the other, an ELA teacher and an academic counselor working to increase the success rates of low-performing students. Together, we used the Principles as well as our own local knowledge of student digital literacies to envision a capstone student experience and develop what came to be known as Project Connect (learn more at sites.google.com/a/pitt.k12.nc.us/project-connect/home).

Collaborative Critique: Professionalizing Teachers Around the Standards

Since North Carolina had planned to implement the CCSS in the coming fall, the school district and JHR administrators were intent on being "CCSS-ready" and were eager to support Project Connect, seeing it as a possible model for how teachers could enact these standards, thus bringing some recognition to the school, its teachers, and its students. As we started our leadership institute, however, it became clear that only the instructional coach—who, by virtue of his position, had attended several state and district-level CCSS training events—enjoyed a thorough understanding of these standards; thus, our early discussions about standards centered on reading and collaboratively interpreting the 12th-grade writing standards. Through this experience, and conversations with teachers across our state and at national meetings

of NCTE and NWP, we know that most teachers have had little direct experience working with the CCSS. Information about the standards has trickled down to teachers in hallway conversations and informal (often uninformed) spaces. We have come to believe that more teachers need both direct access to the CCSS and what their implementation might look like, and critical spaces to engage and question the CCSS with their colleagues. By providing teachers at JHR such a space, we were able to collaborate on Project Connect in more meaningful ways.

As a group, we agreed with the notion that students should have experience writing academic arguments, explanatory texts, and narratives—positions that are articulated by the first three writing standards for grades 11–12 (CCSSO and NGA 2010, 45–46). When we further explored those text types and purposes, however, we started to wonder about the lingering allegiance to the 19th-century modes of writing over more socially shaped, emerging genres; we also questioned the overly prescriptive and narrow ways that these text types were being constructed by the standards. We began to wonder, for example, why the Toulmin model of argumentation was scripted into the description of W.11–12.1a, in which students are asked to introduce claims, establish their significance, and create an organization that logically sequences claims, counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

Furthermore, we worried that this standard might restrict options for authentic argumentation, redeploying the trope of the five-paragraph essay as students (1) introduce and tell the significance of a claim; (2) provide reason 1 with three types of evidence; (3) provide reason 2 with three types of evidence; (4) provide reason 3 with three types of evidence; and (5) refute counterclaims and summarize the claim. With the extreme focus on organization instead of negotiation, a singular model of argumentation as opposed to the rich and multiple genres of persuasion at work in the world, and the lack of more complex models of student writing, we worried that fidelity to such a structure might circumscribe the habits of openness, flexibility, and metacognition that are outlined in the Framework. Similarly, the description in W.11–12.1d struck us as problematic: While W.11–12.1b asks students to consider the audience's "knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases," W.11–12.1d asks students to adopt a "formal style," "objective tone," and write in the norms and conventions of a particular "discipline," again showing a lack of awareness of the diversity in academic audiences, purposes, contexts, and forum conventions (CCSSO and NGA 2010, 45).

If the CCSS are intended to foster a rhetorical approach to composition, which is suggested in the CCSS introduction with the phrase, "they [students] respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline" (7), then why are the standards circumscribing students' construction of rhetorical situations, preventing student choice regarding audience and appropriate tones and styles for those audiences? Why, we wondered, are students, particularly those who are preparing for civic- and career-readiness, being asked to write discipline-specific arguments more appropriate for college students and/or professional academics? We don't expect first-year writers at the university to write like field botanists or John Donne scholars as they could not yet be appropriately "disciplined" to do so in first-year writing courses. Why, then, would we value this outcome for the diverse range of high school students being measured by the CCSS?

Similarly, we wondered why students writing informative/explanatory texts should, as W.11–12.2 suggests, employ the literary techniques of metaphor, simile, and analogy listed in W.11–12.2d. While we appreciated the attention to "precise language" spelled out there, we also imagined how a young entrepreneur preparing a business plan—one example of an informative and explanatory text type regularly practiced in Career and Technical Education—might use the stylistic devices of simile and metaphor inappropriately in context. We imagined the potential failures of constructing a sentence like the following, which uses vocabulary appropriate to the discipline, as well as various metaphors (e.g., simile, personification): "I quite expect my profits, Mr. Capital, to grow like the morning sun out of a dark horizon." Again, this focus in W.11–12.2e on "formal style," "objective tone," and disciplinarity causes us to question what kinds of rhetorical

contexts these documents imagine for high school students—visions that seem quite disconnected from the ways that we and our students use language in social practice. The conversations that we engaged in as professionals allowed us to ask these user-centered questions before entering the classroom with the CCSS. Thus, we've learned that work with teachers around the CCSS should move beyond comprehension of complex (and contradictory) texts and into collaborative critique, which creates opportunities for teachers to build capacity and exercise agency in conversations about curriculum reform.

Reframing the Standards

These discussions helped set the tone for our group's work as we began to think about the CCSS for writing as the lowest common denominator for the kinds of writing students might do in English IV. And while we could critique the constraints of this document, we also seized on one particular affordance: a clear justification for constructing a digital writing curriculum articulated in Anchor Standard for Writing 6. As the NWP with DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, and Hicks (2010) assert in *Because Digital Writing Matters*, "[D]igital writing matters because we live in a networked world and there's no going back. Because, quite simply, *digital is*" (ix). In the former senior project at JHR, however, *digital wasn't.* Students did use technology in the form of word processing programs to produce informative and explanatory texts that would be printed and collected in shiny plastic sleeves, yet the former project largely ignored the participatory, collaborative, networked nature of students' digital writing practices. Working from characteristics that are outlined by Project New Media Literacies (2014) as play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, negotiation, and visualization, the Project Connect leadership team needed to challenge the notion that a digital writing curriculum is about students interacting with machines. Digital writers do, of course, *seem* to interact with machines, but we wanted to recognize in our curriculum revisions that this human–computer interaction is really about using a set of tools to interact with other people by actualizing

a digital communication framework, one that is about making, doing, creating, collaborating, connecting, and ultimately being *present* in the world with others.

To achieve this vision, we had to look beyond the CCSS, working to synthesize what we were learning from our other professional conversations. Thus, we collaboratively read and discussed the Framework as well as the Principles. In contrast to standards that, as Tom Fox (2009) argues, are more about excluding students than granting them access to literacy tools and experiences, the Framework and the Principles seemed to us more inclusive and student-centered. At the very least, the authors begin with the assumption that students have agency in digital composing environments, agency which is often denied them in the documents that teachers and EduCorps write about students. While the Framework and the Principles are explicit about developing college-ready writers, we think the habits of mind they address are actually well-suited for both college- and career-ready students as they embody the notion that learning is both intellectual and practical, an activity that happens both in and outside of school.

As we discussed the habits, we continually asked ourselves about the kinds of experiences with texts and technology that foster curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. Were some of these experiences already seeded in our classrooms? How might we build on what was already there, working from the ground up to effect change as opposed to thinking about reform as a top-down mandate over which we had little or no control? This process of working from teacher expertise as a primary fund of knowledge separated our professional development program from others led by local or state education bureaus and created a comfort zone for educators who were working with the cognitive dissonance of being hit with yet another initiative to fix what others perceive as a broken system.

We found some intriguing answers to our questions about putting theory into practice in the wide variety of resources available through the Principles website, ConnectedLearning.tv. The Principles focus on two

areas: learning and design. Based on research conducted by members of the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub at the University of California, Irvine, this framework asserts that learning happens when students and their peers are actively engaged in knowledge-sharing and ongoing feedback loops, when students are supported in pursuing their interests and passions, and when students are able to translate skills and experiences into academic success. When learning is intentionally designed to shape students as contributors, makers, and producers, to draw on the power of digital platforms and open networks that allow students to synchronize learning in home, community, and school settings, and to connect students with adults who share their interests and passions, students are well-positioned for transformative educational experiences. None of this language, however, is a central part of the CCSS.

As a framework, the Principles push us to consider when and where authentic learning occurs and promote the values of equity and networked learning through a lens that redefines "digital" as both a set of tools *and* a way of knowing and being in a networked world. The Principles, and the case studies that illustrate them, gave us a way to envision how we might design an ELA capstone experience that could engage all students at JHR in designing self-constructed writing experiences through the creation of socially meaningful genres, writing with digital tools for, with, and about communities (Deans 2003) who share their passions and interests. Through these experiences, students could develop the "habits of mind" that would serve them well for writing in communities, whether academic or not.

Out of these conversations and critical questions, the Project Connect team began the task of composing the texts that would articulate its shared curricular vision. These curricular documents were "born digital," collaboratively written and rewritten in Google Docs as we sat at the large conference table in the Writing Program office at East Carolina University with our letters and pictures joining in cyberspace and displaying on our screens. In stark contrast to the 150-page Graduation Project manual, with its formal tone and authoritative directives, we produced a web text that could lessen the rhetorical distance between readers and

writers, playing with the fluid and dynamic boundaries of digital texts. As Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2007) argue, shifts in literate identity require new literacy identities that are participatory, collaborative, and divergent from the ways we have historically understood authorial control. As the teachers in the room worked to embody these new identities, we worked to create a text that could provide space for writing new roles for teachers, media specialists, administrators, parents, and community members, reframing the work of curriculum development and school reform as hypersocial practice. Again, this professional development strategy of having teachers engaged as makers and contributors in digital spaces reinforced the kinds of learning experiences we envisioned for students: building shared purposes, literacies, and identities through connectivity and interactivity.

Building Project Connect

Out of the August professional development retreat, Project Connect team members built a framework for a project that would replace the long-running Graduation Project. While the leadership team wanted Project Connect to remain flexible, it recognized the need to sketch out the broad outlines of the project so that teachers and students knew where they were headed. The new central text of Project Connect would be the Contribution, which the leaders articulated to students as follows: "You will decide what you want to learn and how you want to contribute that learning back to the world around you. The Contribution may be something you share, something you do, something you produce. It may be a solo effort, or it may be a group project. The important thing is that you learn, and that you share that learning with the world." The past Graduation Project had been overly prescriptive and had been fairly teacher-directed, despite discourse that suggested the project focused on student choice. It was important for Project Connect to make sure students engaged their Contribution on their own terms and found a project into which they could invest time and resources. This Contribution involved the students' putting together, on their individual Google Sites website, a series of texts that made up this Contribution: shorter and longer

pieces of writing, multimodal digital texts, videos, podcasts, and so on, as well as a researched paper that would be designed to share inquiry with a larger community than just the teacher or class. Ultimately, the students would then participate in a large public symposium in which they would share their research/inquiry with an audience of their peers, teachers, administrators, families, and community members who were invited to participate. Unlike the Graduation Project presentations, however, audience members were not there to judge or evaluate the quality of the project so much as to offer genuine feedback (e.g., critique, praise, suggestions).

Likewise, while the Graduation Project had, ostensibly, been an extracurricular activity, worked on outside of class yet evaluated by teachers to determine whether or not students graduated, Project Connect was built to be part of English IV; the work of connected learning meant that "school" was part of that connection. One of the goals of the team involved disrupting the traditional boundaries of the classroom and providing a space where teachers and students worked together, along with community mentors, to help focus and direct students' interests into positive and meaningful inquiry projects.

Projects presented at the first symposium ranged from the history and value of sewing/needle-craft in the military to the social-historical implications of super-hero comics to the scientific and business aspects of hair styles in African-American communities. Many of these projects stood rather outside traditional research papers but each demonstrated a connection both to traditional disciplinary inquiry practices and to projects and professions that contribute to the world in important ways. Students presented their Contributions by sharing video interviews they conducted with professionals in fields related to their projects, by sharing digital projects (e.g., Prezi presentations, Bitstrips comic strips) that explored key findings of their work and repurposed them for different audiences, and by showcasing websites and blogs they created to connect their research with real nonacademic audiences. While Project Connect is still a new and developing project, the success of the Contributions and the presentations at the Symposium has suggested that both teachers and students have expanded their perceptions of research and writing in ways that better prepare them to capitalize on digital resources for learning and distributing learning.

Taking It Back to the Building

Key to developing a sustainable project at JHR was using a professional development and engagement model that reflected the sort of networked subjectivities that we had explored in the summer visioning institute and built into the initial design of Project Connect. Therefore, after that institute, the Project Connect leadership team and the school principal identified seven additional teacher-leaders across the curriculum and grade level to bring into the program; these included the school's Media Coordinator, the English Department Chair, a second Career and Technical Education instructor teaching in the Business Department, and two additional English IV teachers and two English III teachers. To support the new Project Connect curriculum both vertically and horizontally, we began an intensive but flexible professional development program that would investigate digital writing and literacy, focusing on the concept and practice of digital writing and the act of teaching digital writers.

We based our programming on successful NWP models of teachers-teaching-teachers and the belief that effective teachers of (digital) writing are (digital) writers themselves. We also leaned heavily on the Critical Elements Framework, which Laura DeSimone (2009) has explored at length. While three members of the Project Connect leadership team had had significant experience in NWP summer institutes, they were far less experienced in developing ongoing, embedded professional development programs and found DeSimone's framework useful as she broadens the working definition of *professional development*, noting that it is both formal (workshops, conferences, meetings) and informal (conversations, co-teaching, mentoring, collaborative inquiry); as DeSimone argues, it is not the structure of the professional development but the "features" that make it effective. These features include a focus on participating teachers'

content concerns; the use of active learning practices, a coherence that is consistent with teachers' beliefs and knowledge as well as local, state, and national initiatives; sufficient duration (some studies suggest semester-long or greater than 20 hours); and collective participation from a group in the same school, grade, or department. All participating teachers were interested in exploring writing in their classrooms, were engaged as thinkers and makers, and worked from a position of exemplary local practice to standards. And since we were a school cohort working together for the year, we felt fairly confident in our professional development design.

Our fall semester programming included a half-day workshop each month during which we discussed readings and ideas from *Because Digital Writing Matters* (NWP with DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, and Hicks 2010), slowly developing a shared vocabulary for talking about the digital. Through our reading and resource sharing, we were again introduced to policy statements on digital literacy by other groups (e.g., the International Technology Education Association), and we started to situate Project Connect at the intersections of conversations that were circulating in multiple educational circles including media literacy, high-needs urban schools, educational technology, service-learning and community engagement, ELA, and writing studies. In short, we were engaging in a rich and complex *network* of texts and ideas, all of which were exploring what it means to compose within digital environments; we were doing what the CCSS expect students to be doing as they explore "claims," outlined in W.11–12.1a and 1b (CCSSO and NGA 2010, 45), that are central to arguments that circulate among (networks of) readers and writers. Our logic here of practicing the language arts we are teaching is central to the NWP philosophy of "writers teaching writing"—to teach a practice well requires recent, relevant experience with that practice. This is where many professional development programs fall short: They operate from logics of indoctrination and enforcement rather than logics of participation and collaboration.

During these workshops, we also spent a good deal of time playing with open-source digital writing tools such as Google Docs, Google

Sites, WordPress, VoiceThread, Piktochart, YouTube Video Editor, and Tagxedo. The leadership team worked to model the functional, rhetorical, and critical support for digital writing that Stuart Selber (2004) articulates in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. We reflected on our digital writing practices and worked to identify iterations of those practices in the CCSS. We found much of what we did as digital writers and digital writing teachers could be interpreted as CCSS practices, and we developed our collective capacity to argue for teacher- and student-centered interpretations of the writing standards. This method, however, was grass-roots: We looked at our own practices as writers and digital composers, and from those practices, we asked, "How do our practices connect to the CCSS?"

To answer that question, we started a collaborative Google Doc that contained the CCSS for writing and asked teachers to summarize a teaching strategy, activity, or unit that they currently used to build capacity for particular standards. What we found here was that teachers were already using digital technologies, mainly Google Docs, "to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information" (CCSSO and NGA 2010, W.11–12.6), and the media coordinator had developed a set of resources that could be used to scaffold academic research practices outlined in W.11–12.7 and W.11–12.8, particularly gathering and evaluating a variety of print and digital sources. Because subject-area Professional Learning Communities had cordoned off ELA teachers from media coordinators, there had been little room to share instructional strategies and bring relevant experience and expertise to bear on the interdisciplinary problems of producing source-based writing. Project Connect programming, then, provided a space for teachers and media coordinators to learn from each other and find ways to strengthen interdisciplinary partnerships inside the building.

This grass-roots, collaborative approach to uncovering what was already there allowed us to engage students, when they returned to school in August, in similar grass-roots inquiry: How do you use

technologies? Which technologies? To what end? From that inquiry, we could begin to see the CCSS as standards that we already met and, at times, exceeded, when we tapped into our school networks of learners, rather than as some set of external impositions or abstract learning principles. This model is antithetical to most professional development in K–12 environments and is absolutely contradictory to the sort of top-down, outsider-as-expert models that EduCorps use in order to manufacture literacy crises for which they also seem to have "the cure." In those models, which range from tests, standards, and professional development materials developed by Pearson and Educational Testing Service/College Board to for-profit products like Study Island and Accelerated Reader, the teacher and student are both seen as ignorant; they do not know what they are supposed to know based on terms and formulas that have been created without engaging them. In our model, teachers and students both have agency and voice; both have knowledge of digital literacies (though sometimes in conflict) that can be tapped to develop processes and products that meet whatever mandated outcome might come along. NWP models start with the assumption that students and teachers are intelligent, purposeful agents who wish to learn and understand themselves and their world. Because we started with this assumption, we were better positioned to develop Project Connect based on a network model of knowledge and language that privileges digital literacies like play, performance, simulation, appropriation, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, and negotiation.

In addition to more structured events, the English IV teachers and the Project Connect Leadership team met weekly to share stories and brainstorm strategies to strengthen the Project Connect program. As one of our team members said, "I've been doing everything from fixing webcams on brand new laptops to using this portal or this site to post a video or host a video, [dealing with] issues with accessibility—on Google Sites you'll see something that is supposed to be viewable to the entire world, and still, for some reason, no one but that student logging in can access that document." Beyond an initial focus on the practical, this teacher went on to explain, "But far and away, the biggest

impediment has just been getting these machines that we've all had for a decade now to actually do something substantive." We cannot understate the importance of that last statement, and how it gives voice to the research of scholars like Barbara Monroe, who noted many years ago in *Beyond the Digital Divide* (2004) that far too many schools have technologies but have no idea how to use them in "substantive" ways. She argues teachers are not given space or time to explore effective practices for integrating digital tools. By building a grass-roots, teacher- and student-led project, we have started collectively to unlock the potential of machines that have done little more than print and collect dust.

Between our face-to-face meetings, we also created and shared digital resources on the Project Connect collaborative blog site, and we planned and implemented several co-teaching and live demo lessons during which Project Connect team teachers could either observe digital writing workshops, participate as coaches leading small groups, or share full-group instruction around topics such as investigating genre conventions of YouTube videos, writing research proposals, or remixing text-based arguments with images and sound for popular audiences.

In this instance, the school media coordinator became a key part of our programming, prioritizing technology resources like laptop carts and computer labs for Project Connect teachers and students, privileging making and creating over content delivery modules and test administration, and working with us to plan and deliver workshops for multiple classes of English II, III, and IV students in the media center. After one of our workshops in the media center, in fact, she said that her work with Project Connect had helped her make sense out of what it meant to be a *media coordinator* as opposed to a librarian. She hadn't had the opportunity to explore digital writing and literacies alongside classroom teachers and reported that through our collaborative work she had come to understand how media coordinators were poised to help teachers and schools make the transition to digital literacies. In one reflection, she wrote:

> Students often don't understand that different groups of people put information on the internet and those groups

> have different agendas. They are still in "textbook mode" assuming because it's there, it's credible. I can help with that. While teachers have particular visions about classroom assignments, I can handle basic information literacy—teaching students to use our media center resources ... to find information on a variety of topics and evaluate those sources for credibility, reliability, and usefulness to the classroom project.

These skills are central to literacies outlined in the CCSS as students are expected to "Research to Build and Present Knowledge" (CCSSO and NGA 2010, W.11–12.7 and W.11–12.8). When professional development programming is effective at surfacing the particular expertise of media coordinators and helping them make connections with subject area teachers, schools can learn to leverage existing knowledge as a catalyst for reform.

Project *Dis*Connect

For the Project Connect leadership team, this work has been intensive, exhausting, and invigorating as we've witnessed the immediate and tangible impacts of our work together on teacher practice and student production. Because we were able to connect at a kairotic moment when so many of these digital and education reform conversations were coalescing at the national, state, and local level, we have gained tremendous support from parents, students, teachers, and school administrators. That is not to say that this work has not had its challenges. While we have implemented a teacher-designed digital writing curriculum, the scaffold for that curriculum was constructed by a small cadre of teachers tasked with building a school-wide program, meaning teachers who were not in the Project Connect leadership institute were then asked to teach a curriculum that they hadn't helped to build. These teachers took longer to engage with Project Connect, which slowed down the project during the first semester.

And while we shared early drafts of our Project Connect website and asked for questions, critique, and feedback, working to incorporate what we received, the English IV teachers who were not part of the leadership institute have, at times, struggled to engage in the project. They have expressed frustration at what they saw as the sonic speed with which we've moved, wondering how to "fly a plane while we're building it." As we wanted all teachers to have a hand in developing the lessons and their own approach to integrating the project in their English IV classrooms, we didn't mandate due dates or produce pacing guides like those that had occupied a large space in the former Graduation Project manual. While the leadership team has referred to the week we spent together as the most enjoyable and transformative experience of the work we've done thus far, noting that the space for deep exploration and negotiated meaning-making was central in our conceptualizations of the project and our approaches to "doing digital" in our classrooms, we cannot stress enough how important it is for meaningful professional development around the CCSS to engage the broadest group of educators possible.

Too often, K–12 professional development, particularly in difficult economic times, has followed a "train the trainer" model: One person from a school or curriculum team receives "training" and then is expected to share materials and information with the rest of the school. While that model seems efficient—and may operate well in various corporate models of education—our experience demonstrates again and again that teachers (and students) want to be involved not merely at the end; they want to be part of building a curriculum that affects them, that reflects local needs and values, and that shapes their professional (or student) lives. Our experience reminds us that we can't underestimate the power of connection and conversation, for students or teachers. It matters who has access to those opportunities—and when. Our project has demonstrated the need for *connectivity*, for engaging curriculum as a networked project that follows the logics of digital literacies rather than those of a "master" project that can be "imported" to different locations.

Connectivity Not Portability

While much of the research that investigates the impact of professional development in schools has focused on how well teachers are able to operationalize an external model with strict fidelity (Biancarosa, Bryk, and Dexter 2010; National Institute for Excellence in Teaching 2012; Saunders, Goldenberg, and Gallimore 2009), the NWP has a strong history of working with teachers as co-researchers and co-makers. This stance positions teachers as knowledge-makers and recognizes teacher agency in the maelstrom of educational reform. Thus, our work in the Project Connect partnership was never about developing a packaged digital curriculum to be exported and implemented elsewhere; instead, it has been about developing a method for connecting teachers with common interests across contexts to "assess locally and validate globally" (Gallagher 2012).

Unlike other professional development organizations that build *for* instead of *with* teachers, our partnership method operates on contemporary notions of teacher-research as articulated by Lee Nickoson (2012) that challenge older notions of classroom-specific, individualistic, and positivistic constructions of teachers-as-researchers. Nickoson's definition of teacher-research acknowledges multiple sites of research and multiple ways of gathering and interpreting data. Most important, however, it is built on feminist research methodologies that foreground ethical stances involving collaboration and collective expertise in multiple research methods as well an understanding that teacher-research may happen in our own classrooms, in other's classrooms, or outside classrooms so long as that research provides "a deeper understanding of student writers" (111). This understanding of specific skill sets, particularly those skill sets built around writing with digital tools, is crucial for enacting the digital in ELA curricula. Thus, through systematic inquiry into the teaching and writing practices that were already positioning students for college and career readiness, our work with teachers at JHR has recognized the particular expertise of the classroom teacher and worked through teacher inquiry and reflection to identify and build on that expertise.

Reframing the CCSS: Making Networks Visible

Absent from previous conversations about the CCSS are discussions of how these new standards are operationalized in schools. The CCSS neither grew organically out of successful teacher practices or teacher inquiry, nor systematically from close observation of students' successes and struggles in the ELA classroom. So for us, Project Connect has been a slow, but meaningful, investigation into what the CCSS look like "on the ground." In the abstract, there is much to praise in the CCSS, including an obvious, if somewhat superficial, concern for genre, process-based writing, and meaningful inquiry/research. But we've also noticed what's *not* there, in large part because of how our project brought the CCSS into conversation with other equally important frameworks around 21st-century digital literacies. While we remain hopeful for what is expressed in the CCSS, we would be remiss if we did not mention the obvious gaps that Project Connect has made visible for us and our teacher colleagues at JHR.

Social Learning

Despite the fact that one of the key functions of a networked society as Manuel Castells (2010) elucidates is the connectedness of its nodes, there remains in the CCSS a lack of awareness of learning as a social activity, and certainly as a social activity that takes place across a network. While there is some superficial concern for writing practices that might involve peer response strategies or the notion that a teacher would comment on writing that would then be revised based on feedback, there remains an absence of any genuine sense that young writers might compose for audiences other than teachers. The hyper-reliance on three of the four modes of discourse (narration, exposition, and argument) as the only modes of communication, and the failure to recognize any audience beyond the classroom, further underscores how little the CCSS attend to issues of digital literacies.

With Project Connect, students recognized that there were audiences beyond the classroom that might be interested in their topics and ideas. While the Graduation Project that had been part of the

curriculum before had always, in some way, assumed that students should be communicating with non-school audiences, those audiences, if they showed up at all, only showed up to judge how good the writing and presentations were at the end of the project; they were not really involved as collaborators or as peer reviewers. By bringing the Principles to the CCSS, and by using Google Sites and YouTube, the teachers helped students to imagine audiences beyond the hyperlocal. This shift is only just emerging, but it's one that we're excited about. Future analyses of student work may help us to better understand how they have made this shift as digital composers.

Public Rhetoric

Another major omission that we've observed in the CCSS involves the rhetorical practices that the standards value. While the phrase du jour is "college and career ready," it seems to us that the CCSS spend much more time working in pseudo-genres and formulaic writing activities that are mostly about outdated academic writing practices. From the mode-based articulation of writing pseudo-genres that are devoid of real (non–school-based) audiences or purposes for composing, to the preoccupation with writing practices that are about a very particular and limited concept of audience and purpose, the CCSS seems most interested in reproducing a very particular type of college student. This is a student who follows directions and acquiesces to the uncritical demands of disciplinary convention; this is a student who sees "school" and "life" as separate and distinct spaces, the latter for genuine engagement with real audiences/purposes and the former for superficial acceptance of authority figures; this is a student, in short, who *dis*connects from his/her meaning-making networks of invention, production, and consumption in order to offer lip service to the histories and modes of knowledge-making that do not challenge or disrupt the status quo.

Across the grade levels, the Anchor Standards for Writing 1d and 2e ask students to "establish and maintain a formal style and an objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing" (CCSSO and NGA 2010, 45), but what does *discipline* mean to someone not going to college, or someone not planning to be part of a narrowly established academic community? What is the discipline of the auto mechanic? The offset printer? The bench chemist at a pharmaceutical plant? The cost accountant at a rural pulp mill? The professional hair stylist? While each of these individuals is part of a career, several of them well-paying, none of them represents a notion of discipline as defined in academic contexts. While we might generously read "discipline" in the CCSS as "discourse community," and therefore open to these different professional discourses, we think it's meaningful that the CCSS chose *discipline* over *discourse community*, primarily for the reasons we just articulated. The CCSS assumes an authority (and knowledge-making) structure that is hierarchical and imposed. *Disciplines* have histories and require that individuals modify their behaviors to become part of them on the terms of the discipline's boundary maintainers (e.g., teachers, researchers). While *discourse communities* assume that novice members have to learn conventions, they are typically more malleable and open for negotiation than academic disciplines. The CCSS' notion of *discipline* seems to us very much in keeping with Foucaultian notions (1995) of knowledge production and distribution. Central to both the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition* (CWPA 2008) and the Framework, however, is the concern for audience/purpose/exigency as they relate to public/civic rhetoric. Many of the writing standards in the CCSS, specifically those noted here, work against effective communication in civic spaces.

Synergy

As DeSimone (2009) notes, transformative learning can happen when, among other factors, professional development is able to realize a coherence that is consistent with teachers' beliefs and knowledge as well as local, state, and national initiatives. Part of Project Connect's momentum, we feel, comes from the synergy of converging interests. We know that top-down curricular mandates do not always impact actual classroom practice, and we also know that grass-roots approaches to teacher-centered classroom reform are not always recognized, supported, or encouraged in the tightly controlled hierarchies common in many of our school systems. Our Project Connect partnership,

however, capitalizes on distributed expertise and networking at the intersection of multiple interests including:

- The administration's desire to be recognized as a clinical school whose teachers and student-teaching interns are involved in creating a culture of excellence through research and partnerships
- The teachers' desire to find higher ground in the flood of information rushing eastward from NC's Department of Public Instruction in Raleigh
- The TRWP's interest in digital writing and its potential for creating more participatory and equitable schools
- The local school district's push to become CCSS ready
- JHR students' desire to be recognized as knowledge makers and writers, and to be supported in developing the capacity to make connections with people, places, ideas, and texts through language

These convergences have enabled us to build a project that, while still in its infancy, has a presence that will endure after the buzz around the CCSS, the Principles, and the Framework has quieted and the professional development funding to support it has expired.

Future Directions: Forging Uncommon Connections

Despite the newness of Project Connect and of this particular partnership between TRWP and JHR, our work together has been both intensive and extended, meeting the timed standard set forth by DeSimone (2009) for effective professional development, and yet this duration seems far too short. The work of teacher-centered curriculum reform and professional development is not efficient. It takes time to read the multiplicity of frameworks that inform our work with digital literacies and investigate research-based teaching practices that can support those frameworks. It takes time to write and speak with students, families, community leaders, school administrators, and other teachers about the curriculum we've designed, and to make justifications and ask for

commentary and critique. It takes time to listen actively to team members and those outside of our team, working to effect "forms of dialogue which facilitate open argumentation and forms of action in common which do not suppress difference" (Fairclough 1999, 153). And it takes time to develop a critical awareness about language in education and to apply that lens to understand how the language in standards and curriculum documents constructs both teacher and student identity.

As teachers, we both give and receive these educational discourses, and while this work is not efficient, it is central to helping us "examine the dialectical between the global and the local" (Fairclough 1999, 151). Ultimately, Project Connect has helped us and the teachers and students at JHR to explore the connections that are essential for 21st-century digital literacies. We believe that Project Connect has helped us to see the CCSS in more rigorous and relevant ways; certainly, it has helped us to discover where the CCSS misses the mark in the digital literacy needs of 21st-century students. This chapter highlights a model of professional development that's both grass-roots and network-based, a model that we think can help other teachers and schools to build curricular models by focusing on the networks of knowledge at their local sites. By connecting the CCSS with other frameworks, teachers, media specialists, and students can work together to build a model that meets both local exigencies and national norms, forging the (perhaps) uncommon connections that make networked literacies so valuable.

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