Standards and the Art of Teaching: Crafting High-Quality Classrooms

Carol Ann Tomlinson

When educators accept responsibility for effective practice in their profession, they in turn ensure that standards support rather than prevent excellent curriculum. This article presents nine guidelines for aligning standards-based practices and instructional best practices in the school and classrooms.

“It’s a race to test day,” the teacher explained with a face that looked too weary for late autumn. “I feel like we have to run like crazy—every day—pretty much all day in order to cover the distance. I’m giving it all I’ve got, but I’m exhausted.” She paused and reflected again. “And I’m the adult—the one with the longest legs in this room. Can you imagine how the kids feel!”

This teacher put words to what many educators feel in this era of mandated standards and high-stakes testing. There is a mass of information she feels compelled to cover with her students—nearly always too much information for the time between the start of the race and the finish line. The effective teacher, she feels, will somehow find the stamina to cover all the ground with her students so they will be prepared when test day comes.

Academic standards should not be in conflict with artful teaching. All professions have clearly articulated standards. In schools, they can help establish a common direction, ensure some equity in learning goals, provide a ready means of communication among educators as well as with parents and community, and serve as common benchmarks that allow teachers to record a student’s learning journey. As such, standards suggest positive possibilities for teachers and learners.

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However, lists of standards are often presented to teachers with little or no effective guidance in how to use them in curricular planning. This is exacerbated by the extraordinary length of the standards lists, with each discipline area reflecting a zeal on the part of its writers to ensure that their subject matter take center stage in the student’s day and mind. Standards documents provide virtually no modeling of the connectivity of knowledge. Further, the topic of instruction is absent from most standards documents. Add to these issues the presence of high-stakes tests, the results of which some may use to judge the worth of teacher and student alike with one measure. Standards, then, may serve more to deprofessionalize than to professionalize teachers, to intimidate more than to support students, and to make instruction an artifact of earlier centuries when educators knew little about how humans learn.

So what should educators do? Is there a way to reconcile standards with what is known about the characteristics of high-quality teaching and learning? The answer, of course, is that if educators accept responsibility for the effective practice of education, it is within their professional reach to ensure that standards support rather than undermine excellent curriculum. The good news is that educators know what makes superior teachers and successful learners. For teachers and leaders of teachers, the job is to ensure that they use what they know in conjunction with standards rather than allow standards to cause them to jettison their professional knowledge.

In this article I present nine interrelated guidelines for ensuring that standards-based practice and instructional best practice come together in schools and classrooms. These guidelines serve as a reminder that standards are not curriculum, and certainly are not instruction. To teach artfully in a time of standards requires that educators meld these requirements with what they know to be effective curriculum, instruction, and classroom environments.

Organizing Curriculum To Account for Standards

Four key principles should guide curriculum planning so that it is augmented but not supplanted by prescribed standards.

Guideline 1: Reflect on the Purpose of Curriculum

Clearly there is information that students must learn if they are to become competent in a given discipline. Educators need to know what that information is. It is likely that a list of standards provides some guidance; it is almost certain that standards will fall short of delineating all that educators value. As Levy (1996) notes:

Curriculum is more than the content of the subject we teach.
One [goal] is certainly the mastery of a specific body of knowledge. But beyond that, the subjects we focus on are means to teach our students how to observe, how to question, how to reason, how to analyze, how to plan, how to make decisions, how to communicate, how to think. We also use subject content to awaken a desire for truth, a passion for understanding, a sense of the joy intrinsic in learning, and empathy for others. We use the curriculum to teach how to work with precision and care, to persevere, and to set high standards of achievement. The tension between covering content on the one hand, and developing habits of mind, heart, and work on the other is at the heart of the debate in schools about what is important to teach. (27–28)

Professional teachers should be clear that teaching should help young people develop meaningful lives. This means ensuring that learners come to know important things. It also means ensuring that they learn to use that knowledge with discerning minds and empathetic hearts to shape a world that is worth living in. Standards can help teachers meet the former goal; they have little to do with the latter. Curriculum must attend to both. To the degree that standards reflect the scope of what to teach, they provide an adequate skeleton for curriculum. Where they fall short, educators are obliged to fill in the gaps.

Guideline 2: Plan Curriculum To Address All Facets of Learning

There are various categories of learning to which curriculum should attend. Each discipline rests on a few theories about how knowledge in the discipline works. Each discipline contains key facts—discrete information that one must know to be functionally literate in that discipline. Also, each discipline is constructed of, or organized by, several key concepts that serve as intellectual building blocks on the discipline. In turn, the concepts are governed by principles that indicate what is important to know about the concepts. Likewise, each discipline has its own set of skills—those functions used by practitioners in the discipline to address the problems and questions of the discipline (Erickson 1998; National Research Council 1999).

Effective curriculum will identify the truly essential facts and vocabulary that students must master in a unit of study. It will then go on to show students the conceptual base of the discipline and the principles that govern the concepts (and hence the discipline), and will lay out plans to ensure that students become increasingly competent with the foundational skills of the particular discipline. In short, good curriculum is organized along the same lines as the discipline it represents: according to the facts, concepts, principles, skills, and theories that form the basis for the discipline.
Examine a list of standards presented to teachers in a discipline such as math, language arts, or biology. Beside each standard, write an *f* if the particular standard represents a fact, an *c* if it represents a concept, an *p* if it represents a key principle, an *s* if it represents a skill, or a *t* if it represents a theory. Then look over the whole document. Often, the result will be a list heavy on facts and skills, and short on concepts, principles, and theories.

Once again, to the degree that standards documents reflect, balance, and coordinate all the facets of learning, they yield a useful framework for planning. Where there are gaps, it is the role of the professional educator to address them in curriculum planning.

**Guideline 3: Plan Curriculum To Help Students Make Sense of Things**

Effective curriculum helps students make sense of knowledge, the disciplines, and life. The banking model of education (based on the assumption that learning is depositing, storing, and withdrawing information for use at a later date) fails most learners (hooks 1994). Langer (1997) further explains:

> Closed packages of information are taken as facts. Facts are taken as absolute truths to be learned as is, to be memorized, leaving little reason to think about them. Without any reason to open up the package, there is little chance that information will lead to any conceptual insights or even be rethought in a new context. (71)

We know that when students do not come genuinely to understand the information, ideas, and skills to which they are exposed, they are powerless to use or to transfer those ideas—or often even to recall them (National Research Council 1999). In fact, they cling to the misperceptions they had of how things work because the misperceptions are more useful to the learner in explaining things than is the “correct” information they “learned” (Gardner 1999).

To the degree that standards help students understand how knowledge is arranged, how things work and why, how practitioners of a discipline do their work, and how all those things relate to the learner’s own life and experiences, they provide a useful framework for teaching. To the degree that any of those things are missing from standards documents, curriculum designers must add them. As Wiggins and McTighe (1998) point out, the essential job of the teacher is not coverage of information but uncoverage of meaning.

**Guideline 4: Organize the Curriculum so that Its Contents Are Manageable for Teachers and Students**

A key fault of many standards documents is that they appear to be lists of seemingly unrelated facts, skills, and sometimes even topics. One wonders,
for example, why one state standards document bases a major segment of history standards for one grade level on a study of Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, and Jamestown.

There are numerous ways to organize subject matter meaningfully. In one district, subject area specialists organized mandated standards by concepts essential to the disciplines. The specialists also showed teachers relationships among standards across grades and subjects and made suggestions of ways to teach the standards that were far more economical of time and reinforcing of understanding than covering them as a list.

For example, a high school biology teacher organized his curriculum to guide students in understanding that biology is essentially a study of observation, classification, verification, and explanation applied to a study of cells, tissues, individuals, populations, and ecosystems, using carefully designated skills of science to inquire. This teacher organized his subjects conceptually, giving coherence to the curriculum for himself and the students. Steven Levy (1996) organizes what he and his students investigate by connecting most learning experiences to a real-world investigation so that, for example, students come to understand social studies, simple machines, mathematics, language, music, and art by living and working as the pilgrims did. His curricular organization is not so much conceptual as it is experiential.

In both instances, teachers developed organizational frameworks that made curricular material seem more coherent and time constraints more manageable. Indeed, even if teachers and students in these classes did not cover everything, students had tools for thinking about unfamiliar material when they encountered it—whether in life or on a test.

Curriculum should stem from a clear organizational framework that helps teachers and students see the big picture of what is to be taught and learned. It should help teachers and students see how various learning experiences lead to greater understanding over time. It should provide teachers with a scope and sequence of skills, understanding, and information that allows them to understand what came before and what comes after the portion of curriculum they teach. In turn, this understanding allows them the confidence and flexibility necessary to match the curriculum to learner need without abandoning the core intent of the curriculum.

To the degree that standards documents make explicit this sort of organization, they are useful as a curricular framework for teachers and students. To the degree that they fall short in this area, content specialists and teachers will need to develop and articulate the organizational frame.

Standards are not designed to be curriculum, but rather designated ingredients in curriculum. Someone other than standards writers (i.e., curriculum specialists and teachers) will have the responsibility of taking the ingredients delineated in the standards documents and blending them with
other essential ingredients into a curriculum that is appealing to and nourishing for those who will consume it.

**Planning for Instruction with Standards-Based Curriculum**

Meaningful curriculum is essential to any teacher who wants to ensure student success. It is, however, not sufficient for student success. A second key element in planning meaningful learning opportunities for students is instructional design. Curriculum is *what* is taught. Instruction is *how* it is taught. Artful curriculum does not achieve its potential unless it is partnered with artful instruction. Three additional principles are necessary to examine the nature of instruction in an era of standards.

**Guideline 5: Design Instruction so that Learning Is Invitational to Students**

“Schools and teachers must accept the fact that the attention and commitment of students must be earned. They cannot be commanded” (SchleCHty 1997, 49). Learning should be joyful for young learners—or at the very least, intriguing and satisfying. Not only is it the nature of youth to respond to joy, but learning itself should be one of life’s greatest joys.

Invitational learning is not opposed to challenging learning. In fact, student self-efficacy stems from accomplishing work that seemed a bit out of reach. Teachers who promote invitational learning use curiosity, humor, objects, variety, student choice, action, puzzlement, stories—whatever it takes—to hook learners so that they find it difficult to resist the challenge.

One of the key threats of the race-to-coverage mentality that stems from the pressure of a high-stakes, standards-based environment is a teacher’s sense that he or she has no time to engage learners. Teachers who do not actively try to engage their students will have few learners, observe little lasting learning, and find that their students do not think of themselves as lifelong learners. It is critical to remember that it is the educator’s job to make learning attractive.

**Guideline 6: Design Instruction for Focused Action**

That teachers plan to engage students is of great importance. It is equally important, however, that they plan for student understanding of ideas and skills and their use in the real world. Students are far more likely to learn what they do than what they hear. Therefore, when educators begin to translate curriculum into instruction (to move from the what to the how), they should attend to two key traits of effective learning experiences. First, a learning experience must be unambiguously focused on what we want students to know, understand, and be able to do as a result of that learning
experience. Second, the learning experience should summon students to action—make them thinkers, problem solvers, and creators.

To the degree that standards define what students should take away from school (and, again, standards will seldom adequately encompass an educator’s entire agenda), educators must ensure that student work is tightly focused on the standards (structured for meaning and presented in an appealing manner). Simultaneously, however, students should be taking action on what teachers want them to learn. That is, instruction should be student-focused in ways that ask each student to create, argue with, analyze, reconstruct, look at multiple perspectives on, use, reflect on, and communicate about the precise ideas and skills on which teachers intend them to focus. The power of listening, copying, and absorbing pales by comparison to the power of doing.

**Guideline 7: Design Instruction To Attend to Learner Variance**

Even before the pressure of standards-focused agendas, instruction tended to overlook student variance. In fact, it may be the degree of failure stemming from an inattention to the variety of student learning needs that has caused policymakers to feel a need to intervene in the classroom.

It may (regrettably) be the case that the high-stakes test at the end of the year shows total disregard for the child who does not yet speak English, the student who can demonstrate knowledge in practical settings but is a poor test taker, the young person whose learning disability makes such tests painful, and so on. That is no reason for teachers to abandon the belief that a student must learn from his or her current point of experience, understanding, and skill. I may be “assigned” to teach a student how to use fractions, but I cannot do so if he does not yet understand addition and subtraction. To help that student grow, I must begin where he is. If a student has already mastered fractions, I do that learner a disservice when I assume that she is competent in the use of fractions and therefore has no further learning needs. To help her grow, I must begin where she is and help her progress.

In addition to student variance that stems from readiness, culture and gender as well as student interest can also greatly influence how a student learns (Tomlinson 1999, 2000). Effective instruction proactively provides for variance in student readiness, interest, and mode of learning through use of a wide range of instructional strategies, varied options for how students express and demonstrate their learning, small group teaching matched to learner need, opportunities for individuals to explore questions and topics of interest to them, varied modes of teacher presentation, opportunities for students to work alone or collaboratively, flexible grouping of students, indi-
vidual and small group coaching and scaffolding by teachers to ensure understanding, and so on.

Perhaps more than ever before in schools—precisely because of the pressure of standards-based teaching and testing—educators need to remind themselves that individuals learn differently. It is a teacher’s job to build a bridge between subject matter and learner by recognizing where a student is in a learning sequence, what the student cares about, and how the student learns (National Research Council 1999). Increasingly diverse student populations render obsolete the question, “How do I motivate students?” Rather educators should ask themselves, “How do I motivate this particular student, and how do I design instruction that responds to his or her particular motivations?” (Schlechty 1997).

Seldom do standards documents address the issue of instruction, that is, how to ensure that students learn what educators say they value. It becomes tempting in the face of that silence and the pressure to produce standardized learners to leave behind the knowledge of what high-quality teaching looks like. However, doing so will leave behind not only students but also the art of the profession.

Planning for Learning Environments with Standards-Based Curriculum

If educators created rich, coherent curriculum documents that subsumed standards, and then developed instructional plans that were alluring, focused, active, and responsive to individual need, one additional feature of the classroom would still demand attention. Learning environments can either attract students to otherwise good instructional plans, or discourage or even repel learners. Two final principles are always crucial to effective teaching and learning, and may be especially so in high-pressure settings such as those that evolve around standards.

Guideline 8: Work for Learning Environments Typified by Safety, Respect, and Trust

For many students, the most powerful messages in school come not from the text or the teacher’s mouth but from the intangible and powerful atmosphere of the classroom (and school). That atmosphere will signal without ambiguity whether the classroom is a place in which making a mistake is considered part of the natural learning process or a punishable event; varied ideas and perspectives are celebrated or rejected; diverse languages, cultures, and economic statuses are valued or problematic; and a student’s current degree of skill and understanding is acceptable or inconvenient. The pressures that surround standards-based classrooms can make it even more difficult to establish safety, trust, and respect in the classroom.
Those same pressures also make it all the more essential that educators continually plan for and assess their effectiveness in establishing safe, trustworthy, and respectful classrooms for all learners.

In a standards-based system, effective teachers find a way to remind themselves daily that their job is not merely transmitting information but also sharing in the development of the intellect and soul of their students. “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks 1994).

Guideline 9: Teach for Success

Most students can learn and do far more than educators believe they can. That is true for students who struggle mightily in school, those who excel, and those whose academic profiles are more typical. The goal of teaching ought to be maximizing the capacity of each learner.

To enact that goal, the learning environment in a classroom must clearly signal that in this place, all school stakeholders do what it takes to help students grow. That may mean that teachers offer some in-class instruction targeted at varied learning needs. It may mean that students participate in before- or after-school opportunities to get help. It may mean that parents are involved as partners in success. It may include the use of mentors, volunteers, or tutors. It will certainly involve understanding the particular strengths of individual students and building on those strengths (National Research Council 1999). It must be clear to students that teachers—as well as peers—are partners in accomplishing the goal of schoolwide academic success.

If This Sounds Familiar...

What constitutes artful teaching in an era of academic standards? The answer is not surprising. Teachers in standards-based systems teach skillfully in a time of standards in exactly the same way that they always have: by having a sense of mission, by organizing what they want to teach in ways that make the best use of time, by teaching individuals rather than masses, by helping students make sense of and apply their learning, by actively engaging students in their lessons, by caring deeply about those who entrust their learning to them, and by acting on the belief that each student will leave the classroom markedly stronger than when he or she arrived.

Teaching well with standards means teaching well. The challenge is to integrate standards into effective instruction rather than to allow the pressure that standards inevitably bring to cause educators to abandon decades of sound knowledge about quality teaching. Perhaps the most important responsibilities of educational leaders in the standards era are to (a)
encourage teachers to reflect on the real mission of education, and (b) to provide the time, resources, and leadership that ensure teachers incorporate standards in their instruction in ways that cause them to embrace artful teaching with passion rather than retreat from it.

References


