CHAPTER 1

The Heart of the Common Core

Points of Emphasis in the Literacy Standards

A Confession

Unlike most educators, I got to know the Common Core on my own terms. I learned about the new standards while writing my first book, *Blended Learning in Grades 4–12,* during a year's leave of absence from teaching. I was thrilled by the prospect of anchoring my ideas in a common language that would speak to educators all over the country.

I'm sure my response to the Common Core would have been significantly less optimistic and positive if I had heard about the new standards at an administrative meeting. For years, teachers in my district, and districts across the nation, have faced myriad challenges—larger class sizes, less access to resources, and little to no professional development opportunities. Understandably, many teachers are skeptical of this shift to a new set of standards. They are not confident they will have access to ongoing professional development or the technology required to make this transition to the Common Core exciting, instead of stressful.

As a result, many experienced educators experience frustration, exasperation, and fear when they hear the phrase *Common Core.* In an attempt to combat that fear, I want to begin this book by sharing my initial reactions to the Common Core and highlight the points of emphasis that I found refreshing.

First Impressions

The first thing I noticed when I pored through the Standards was what I perceived to be the shift from what students must know, the emphasis on content and minutiae, to what they should be able to do with that information, the skills they need to develop.

Students today are hyperconnected to information, so it's less important that they remember every date and detail. It's more important that they are able to apply what they've learned. So I was delighted by the prospect of shifting the discussion from what students should know to what they should be able to do. Because to *do* something, students must have a strong enough understanding of the content to apply it.

This shift also resonated with me because I strive to create a student-centered classroom. In this environment, students must transition from a passive role, consuming information, to an active role, generating information. This is no easy task. Truth be told, it is much easier to sit in a room quietly and listen to a teacher talk. It is exponentially more challenging to engage with peers, problem solve, and think critically. Although the role of an active participant is more demanding, it is also more stimulating and rewarding. Technology has played a vital role in helping me to actualize my student-centered classroom; students now have the tools to find information, collaborate, and create.

Points of Emphasis in the Common Core

I realize that no matter what I say, there are plenty of people in education who are ideologically opposed to standards in general. I cannot fault educators who are frustrated with standards-based instruction that culminates in standardized exams. In an era of personalization and differentiation, the standardized exam is deeply ironic and often counterproductive. These exams and the scores students receive frequently undermine the hard work happening in classrooms. I have been disappointed by the misplaced focus on the exams, which often overshadow and distract from the actual day-to-day learning. Too often the conversation is myopically focused on test scores instead of on the learning, which is a problem.

That said, I am a teacher. No one consulted me or asked my opinion; I don't get to decide if there are standards. I do, however, get to decide what form those standards will take in my classroom and what tools we will use to learn and develop specific skills. Instead of focusing on all of the aspects of a standards-based system that I don't feel are productive for education, I'd rather put my energy into finding creative ways to teach the skills my students need to be successful long after they leave my class.

There are important points of emphasis in the Standards that I highlight when working with teachers, because I feel they are universally valued and valuable:

- Communication
- Collaboration
- Research
- Higher-order thinking
- Literacy across disciplines
- Technology and media literacy

Communication

The Common Core Standards value formal and informal, in person and online, communication. Communication is no longer relegated to "oral presentations." The Standards state that students should participate in a variety of different types of

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Students engaged in small-group student-led discussions called Four-Corner Conversations.

conversations, including teacher led, student led, one-on-one, small group, and large group. They should discuss texts and real-world issues with a range of partners to ask questions, build on other students' ideas and express their own thoughts "clearly and persuasively" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015).

The language used in the Standards reflects the changes in the way we communicate. Today, communication is increasingly informal, succinct, and digital. The average teen fires off 60 text messages each day (Cocotas, 2013). Many of our students communicate virtually as much, if not more, than they communicate in person. This is reflected in the Writing Standards, which note that communication skills online are a critical life skill. By the time they leave high school, students must be able to "use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others" (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6).

This emphasis on using technology and the Internet to communicate is often scary for traditional teachers. In my first book, *Blended Learning in Grades 4–12*, I wrote about the importance of proactively teaching online communication and creating a safe space online by establishing clear expectations for online engagement, providing concrete strategies for adding substantively to a conversation, and building a strong online community to complement and enhance in-class interactions. This is no longer an aspect of learning that can be ignored. It is every educator's responsibility to teach students how to use technology to communicate effectively.

As evidence of the need to develop communication skills, a survey of over 500 top executives found that 92% reported "a jobs skills gap" and "nearly half believed the gap was in 'soft skills'—communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration" (Wastler, 2013). The survey also reported gaps in lack of technical, leadership, and computer-based technology skills. However, the lack of soft skills was emphasized as particularly alarming. Although "some companies may be hurting because they can't find the right technical help, a lot more will suffer if they can't find people with basic communication skills" (Wastler, 2013). These communication skills are no longer limited to face-to-face interactions in our increasingly digital world. Employees today must be able to communicate effectively via email and video conferencing tools, like Skype, Google Hangouts, WebEx, and GoToMeeting. To be truly "college and career ready," students will need to be comfortable communicating in a range of mediums with a variety of people.

Collaboration

The word *collaboration* is used almost synonymously with *21st century skills.* This builds nicely on the priority given to communication, because to effectively work with others toward a shared goal or to produce something, students must possess strong communication skills.

Lack of time is the biggest obstacle to fostering meaningful collaboration in the classroom. In the past, I always felt I was in a race against the bell. I had so much content to cover and never enough time. Luckily for educators today, technology provides countless opportunities for students to continue collaborating asynchronously online to extend the work they do in class. Technology can free us from the race against the bell. It can connect students so their interactions and work are no longer limited to a particular time or physical space. Blending in-class work with online interactions can be incredibly powerful and provide more opportunities for students to work together to creatively apply what they are learning.

Both the Common Core Writing and Speaking and Listening Standards mention the need to develop collaboration skills both in person and online. Students are expected to "learn to work together, express and listen carefully to ideas" and "prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners" (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1). Unlike the classrooms of the past when teachers stood at the front of the room disseminating information, students today must learn the skills needed to build knowledge together via their conversations and interactions.

Forbes Magazine published an article titled "The 10 Skills Employers Want in 20-Something Employees," which reported that the number one skill employers want when recruiting college graduates is the ability "to work effectively in a team," the ability to collaborate. In fact, the top three skills employers are looking for all play a role in successful collaboration. According to *Forbes,* the "ability to work in a team . . . make decisions and solve problems . . . [and] plan, organize and prioritize work" are the most sought after skills. It's worth noting that the fourth skill on the list is the "ability to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization" (Adams, 2013). It's clear that both collaboration and communication are critical to success in the workplace.

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Students collaborating using devices to create a timeline of events in Maya Angelou's life.

Research

The word *research* appears 80 times in the English Language Arts (ELA) section of the Common Core Standards. Thanks to technology, students have unlimited amounts of information at their fingertips. Access to information empowers students to embrace a more active role in the classroom, because they are no longer dependent on a teacher or text to provide all of the answers. However, the reality is that most students lack experience finding, evaluating, and applying the information that is all round them. They need to be taught research skills, which is why there is an entire chapter in this book dedicated to teaching research creatively (see Chapter 7).

Research skills are embedded throughout the standards. They do not appear in a separate section or strand since they play a role in reading, writing, language development, speaking, and listening. In the section of the Common Core called "Key Design Considerations," it stresses that

> to be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems. (CCSS.ELA-Key Design Considerations)

These skills should not be taught in isolation, but rather should be a cornerstone of every course. Students must do research on a regular basis, both formally and informally, to develop and hone these skills.

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Student using an iPad to research the 1930s for our *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit.

According to the *Forbes* article mentioned above, hiring managers are looking for employees with the "ability to obtain and process information" (Adams, 2013). This is the fifth most desirable skill on their top 10 list. Not only will employees need to be able to find and make sense of information, but it better be credible and current too.

Higher-Order Thinking

The preamble of the Standards Setting Criteria document states that the Common Core Standards were developed to be "inclusive of rigorous content and applications of knowledge through higher-order skills, so that all students are prepared for the 21st century" (CCSS.ELA-Criteria). This focus on higher-order thinking requires a fundamental shift in how students learn and how teachers teach. Classes reliant on the lecture models of the past will fail to produce the dynamic students and employees needed for the future.

Too often lecture models are paired with activities that check for understanding and only engage lower-order thinking—recalling information and demonstrating basic understanding of concepts. These classes rarely allow students time to construct knowledge via conversation, research, and collaboration. In part, this is a product of the outdated dynamic of the "traditional classroom," where rows of desks are set up facing the front of the classroom. This physical arrangement reinforces the assumption that teachers possess all the answers. If the teacher has all of the answers, why should students ask questions, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and create?

The truth is that it's much easier for teachers to stand in front of a class and tell students everything they know about a topic they've been teaching for years. It's infinitely more challenging to create learning opportunities to engage students and allow them to ask questions and reach conclusions on their own. However, it is this

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Students research using devices and work collaboratively to construct a replica of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

shift that is needed if students are going to be ready for the rapidly changing world that waits for them after high school.

To engage in higher-order thinking, students must be given opportunities to solve problems, think critically, and create. Eric Mazur, Balkanski Professor of Physics and Applied Physics at the Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, identifies the need to focus "on higher-order thinking skills [at the college level], skills that are related to judgment, analysis, creativity, and not the lowest-order thinking skills like memory and procedures" (Pazzanese, 2014).

Harvard is not alone in beginning to experiment with new approaches to learning that move from amphitheatre style lecture halls to work spaces with rooms "that looks more like a studio where students sit in groups around tables, and the focus is on them, not on the instructor" (Pazzanese, 2014). These changes in the layout of classrooms and learning environments are geared toward engaging students' in higher-order thinking.

Emerging blended learning strategies, like the flipped classroom, and trends in education, like the Maker Movement, where students build and invent to learn, have intrigued educators, because they too offer an escape from the classic lecture model. By contrast, these emerging models embrace new approaches to learning that challenge students and force them to be active participants in the classroom. Technology, combined with innovative approaches to teaching, is making it possible to transform the classroom into a space where students work together to construct knowledge.

Literacy Across Disciplines

The Standards assert that developing literacy is a "shared responsibility," so the Reading and Writing Standards for English, history, science, and technical studies share

similar language and goals. This interdisciplinary approach to teaching literacy was motivated by the "extensive research establishing the need for college and career ready students to be proficient in reading complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas" (CCSS.ELA-Key Design Considerations).

Unfortunately, the decline in the rigor of reading at the high school level, falling SAT scores, and the high number of students entering college requiring remedial reading and writing classes reflect a systematic failure to prepare students for the demands of college level reading and writing.

Although the responsibility of cultivating literacy has classically been assigned to English teachers, it is clear that reading and writing in English alone is not enough to adequately prepare students. It is crucial that students regularly read different types of texts—fiction, nonfiction, and informational—and write for various audiences and purposes. As an English teacher, I welcome this change. There is only so much that one teacher can assign and assess. If every teacher contributes to the cultivation of literacy, students will be better prepared when they leave school.

That said, not all history, science, and technical studies teachers feel confident teaching reading and writing. I hope this book will support their efforts as I've adapted strategies I use in my own English class to help support the work done in other subject areas.

Technology and Media Literacy

Like research, technology does not appear in a separate strand of the Standards. It's woven throughout the Common Core, to mirror its ubiquitous role in our lives. How can we separate technology from reading, writing, and speaking? A rising number of people read their articles online, books on Kindles, take notes on their iPads, write papers using Word or Google documents, and record voice memos on their phones. Our literacy is becoming increasingly linked to technology.

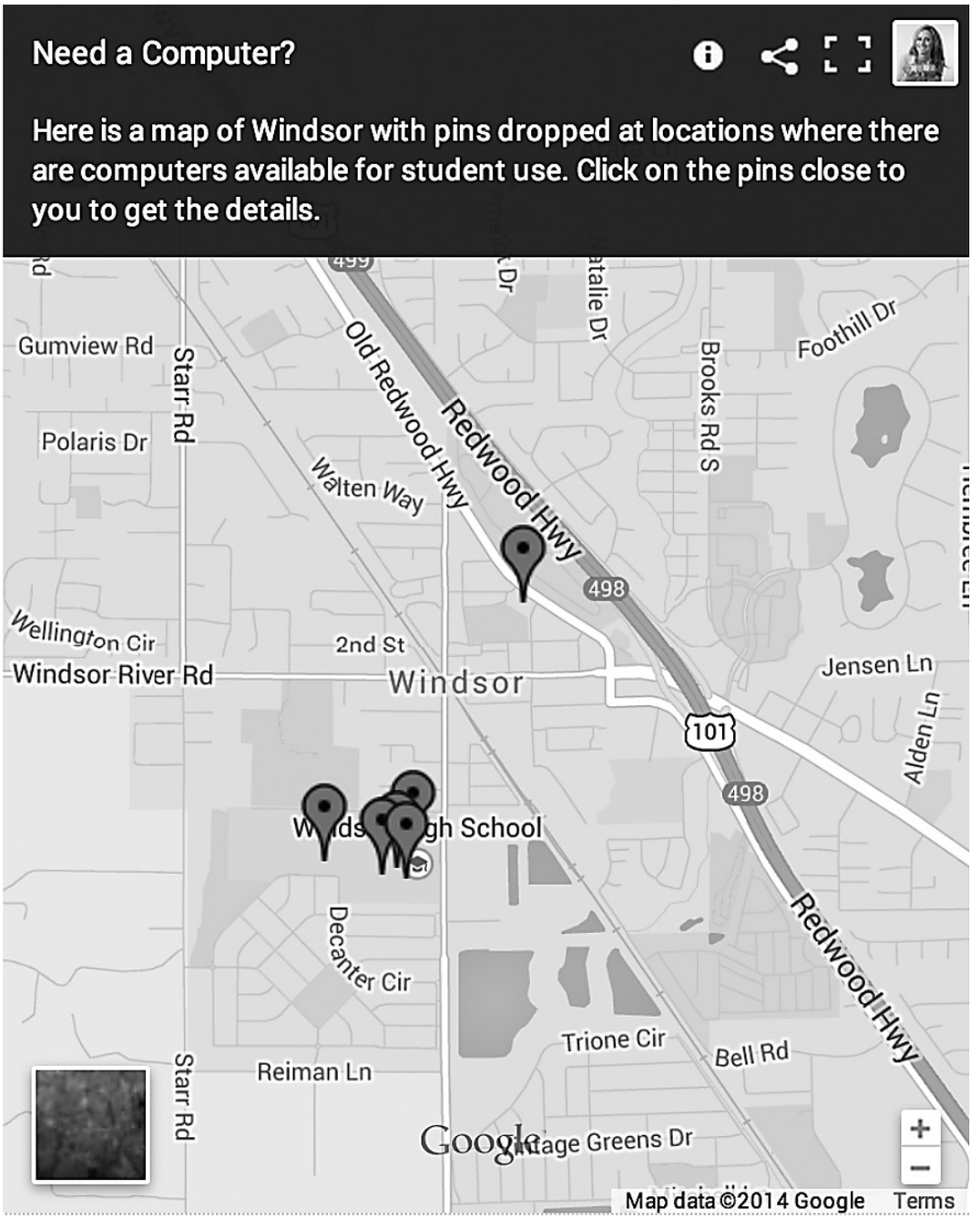
The description of a college and career ready student, states that they are able to

> employ technology thoughtfully to enhance their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language use . . . They are familiar with the strengths and limitations of various technological tools and mediums and can select and use those best suited to their communication goals. (CCSS.ELA-Students Who Are College and Career Ready)

To use technology effectively to enhance their communication, as well as understand the strengths and weaknesses of various tech tools, students must be given countless opportunities to engage with different types of technology over the course of their kindergarten–12th grade education. Technology must be a staple in every classroom. I realize this statement will make some teachers bristle given the lack of technology available to many of us, but there are ways to creatively leverage the tools students bring into our classrooms each day (see Chapter 2, "Transforming Low-Tech Classrooms With BYOD and Mobile Devices"). The question can no longer be, "What if they don't have access?" The question must become, "How do we get them access?"

I've embedded a Google Map (see Figure 1.1) in my class website with all of the locations on our campus and in our community where students can get online. I've dropped pins noting the location of computer labs, student-use computers in

Figure 1.1 This is the Google Map I've embedded into my class website identifying all of the locations on our campus and in our community where students can get online.



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classrooms, our local library, and any areas in the community where free Wi-Fi is available. This is an easy way to raise awareness about where and when students can access computers and the Internet.

Technology is transforming every aspect of life. Students who leave school without technology and media literacy will be hard pressed to find work in our increasingly high-tech economy. This may be daunting for teachers who have spent much of their careers teaching with pen, paper, and books. It's important that teachers know that integrating technology into our practice does not happen overnight. The SAMR Framework, developed by Dr. Ruben Puentedura, lays out a path that educators can follow to begin slowly integrating technology into their lessons.

SAMR Framework

The acronym SAMR stands for substitution, augmentation, modification, and redefinition. This can be a helpful way for teachers to think about using technology in their classrooms. It acknowledges that technology integration is a progression. At each stage, technology is used in a slightly more sophisticated way. Teachers can also use the SAMR Framework to evaluate the purpose of technology in a given lesson (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 This chart defines the different stages of the SAMR Framework and provides examples of activities that fall within each stage.

Substitution	When teachers use technology instead of another tool, it is called *substitution.* The task stays the same, but the technology replaces a prior tool.	Use an online dictionary to look up the definitions of words instead of using the paperback dictionary. Use a projector to project notes onto a board instead of writing them out. Use an online annotation tool, like Diigo, to annotate online texts instead of using a highlighter and a paper text. Type an essay on a Word document instead of writing it out by hand on paper.
Augmentation	When teachers use technology to add to a lesson, it's called *augmentation.* The task stays the same but the technology is used to replace a prior tool and the added technology offers more features and better functionality.	Use a student response system or a polling app, like Poll Anywhere, to do quick assessments and check for understanding. Use a PowerPoint with embedded media—photos and video—to present a multimedia presentation. Use Google documents to type a paper and use the features available to define unfamiliar vocabulary and research within the document, add images and hyperlinks, and collaborate with peers.

Modification	When teachers use technology to make changes to improve or enhance a lesson, it's called *modification.* The task changes or is redesigned because the technology allows students to do something that was not previously possible without technology.	Replace lecture with a crowdsourcing activity using devices in the classroom to allow students to research information and share their findings. (For more on crowdsourcing, see Chapter 7.) Use a screencasting tool, like Educreations (free iPad app), to allow students to record and capture a visual and audio explanation of their work. They can solve problems, label maps or cells, or explain the development of a character or theme. Use online asynchronous discussions to discuss literature, lab experiments, historical events, and people.
Redefinition	When technology is used to do something totally new, it's called *redefinition.* The task is new and was not previously possible prior to the addition of technology.	Transform a narrative into a digital story using tools like iMovie, stop motion technology (like Lego Movie Maker) or time lapse technology (like iMotion HD). Connect with other classrooms and experts using Skype or Google+. Publish multimedia portfolios of student work online. Design multimedia infographics of research to publish online.

Most teachers begin by using technology to substitute or modify an existing lesson. Because the task stays the same in the substitution and modification stages, this is easier for teachers who are experimenting with technology. Unfortunately, most teachers want to feel comfortable using technology themselves before they allow students to use it in the classroom. Teachers feel unnecessary pressure to "master" tools, but it is unrealistic to think we can outpace our students, who are digital natives. I hate to see teachers wait any longer than necessary to begin incorporating technology into their classrooms. And you may learn lessons from your tech-savvy students as you proceed. I definitely have.

As teachers begin to use technology flexibly, they will begin to design lessons that begin in one medium—in classroom or online—and extend fluidly into the other. Ideally, each activity should be paired with the best learning environment for the task assigned.

Tips for Teachers Just Getting Started

Starting anything new is daunting, so here are some of the tips I learned the hard way.

Tip 1: Think Big, But Start Small

You don't have to try every tool or strategy in this book. Instead, start with one tool and one strategy, make a bunch of mistakes, learn a ton, and add another tool or technique to your teacher tool belt. This approach is less intimidating.

Tip 2: Be Patient With Yourself

Learning anything new takes time. Be patient with yourself. The first time you try out a tool or teaching strategy using technology you may encounter some bumps or issues that require troubleshooting. That's okay! I promise your students will be impressed that you are stepping outside of your comfort zone to experiment. In these moments, you are modeling lifelong learning. If you get stuck, ask your students for help. They can be incredible resources in the classroom.

Tip 3: Celebrate Mistakes

Mistakes lead to learning. It is in moments of failure when we have the greatest potential for growth. As a society, we need to remove the taboo associated with failure. If you are failing, it means you are pushing yourself and taking risks. We need more of that in education!

Tip 4: Use Technology to Replace and Improve

Technology integration must be sustainable. It's key that technology is not something additional you add to your already overflowing plate. Instead, use technology to replace and improve existing activities and assignments.

Tip 5: Get Connected

Before you can effectively integrate technology that is "sustainable" and that ultimately makes you more effective and efficient, you must get connected. Getting connected can motivate you to take risks. Once you begin to appreciate the innovative ways that other educators are using technology with students, you'll be more excited to try new tech-infused teaching strategies. Building a PLN or PLC (Personal Learning Network or Personal Learning Community) can help you form these crucial relationships and provide you with support as you explore web tools and teaching strategies. My PLN on Twitter, Google+, and Pinterest is a wealth of information and a constant source of inspiration.

Celebrating a Common Language

For me, the real beauty of the Common Core is the common language it provides educators. When combined with technology's ability to connect teachers all over the country, this common language can be a catalyst for exciting changes in education. It creates all of these wonderful opportunities to connect with, learn from, and collaborate with educators nationwide to ensure that our students are getting the very best education possible.

As educators, we have an opportunity to decide what we want classrooms to look like, what the future of learning will look like. Yes, technology is changing education, but it isn't going to save education. Innovative, risk-taking educators are going to save education. The Common Core offers an opportunity to

take the focus off of the minutia to free us as teachers to think about the big stuff—the skills we believe students need to be successful when they leave our classrooms.

Regardless of how teachers feel about standards, they are part of our teaching reality. I cannot personally change whether or not standards exist, but I can decide what shape and form they take in my classroom and in my teaching.

WRAP UP

The Common Core is controversial, but wouldn't it be wise to welcome the new Standards as guidelines to bring the 21st century into classrooms that are still stuck in the 20th century? That's how I think of them. It seems a laudable endeavor to adopt tools and methods that will equip today's high school graduates with the skills they need to face the current real-world demands of college and careers, which differ substantially from demands of the pre-Information Age.

Some of the anti-Standards group base their concern on the standardized test element of Common Core. I fully agree. But we've had standardized tests for years before the Common Core. This is not new.

Education has gone through many phases of evolution. We progressed from writing on papyrus and parchment to pencils, pens, and paper notebooks. But in many classrooms, that is still largely the norm today, despite the reality that laptops, smartphones, and tablets are becoming ubiquitous. I'd argue that technical illiteracy today is as big a handicap as illiteracy, the inability to read or write, was 50 years ago!

I hope many of you who read this book will look on Common Core not as something established to make your lives miserable, but as guidelines to help you prepare your students for the real world awaiting them after graduation.

STUDY QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. What was your first impression of the Common Core? What aspects of the new standards were you most excited and/or concerned about?
2. Compare your previous state standards for your grade level and subject area with those in the Common Core. What similarities and differences do you notice between the two sets of standards? Are there elements in the new standards that are new or unfamiliar?
3. How are you currently teaching the points of emphasis discussed in this chapter: communication, collaboration, research, higher-order thinking, literacy across disciplines, technology and media literacy?
4. Look at the SAMR Framework and describe a lesson or activity you've done with your own students that is an example of substitution, modification, augmentation, or redefinition. How did you and/or your students use technology? Did the task

change or stay the same? What was the most challenging and/or rewarding aspect of this lesson? Could it be altered to move further down the SAMR Framework toward redefinition?

5. How do you currently "connect" with other educators? Do you find time to connect with teachers on your campus to collaborate and share best practices? Do you currently use social media (Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, or Facebook) to connect with other teachers? If not, are you open to using social media to connect?

Access live links at
http://bit.ly/CreativelyTeachwithTech
(*case sensitive).