



Leading the Shift: Strategies for Your Transition to Common Core

How do you help teachers become better at their craft and maximize professional learning time in the face of major shifts like Common Core? Top educators from the recent THE Journal/Teaching Channel Common Core summit share best practices.

Learning is messy. Failure has purpose. Teaching a bad lesson happens once in a while. And if you're nervous about approaching the Common Core in a world of high-stakes online assessment and, some day, even higher stakes evaluations, you're probably not alone.

At least not according to the cohort of acclaimed teachers and education experts who shared those sentiments and more during the recent [Lead the Shift: Strategies to Implement Common Core Standards for All Students](#) summit. This daylong event was held in May for California educators, hosted by THE Journal, and presented by the nonprofit video resource community [Teaching Channel](#), in Long Beach.

In the midst of so much upheaval, a small group of experienced education leaders discussed what true integration of the standards looks like, from the role of administrators down to a granular level (that is to say, how individual teachers and students are coping). Speakers touched on a wide variety of topics, but in the end nearly everyone hit on a similar group of themes, including PD strategies, using video to

improve teacher effectiveness, teacher collaboration, and school restructuring.

"Students now have to show their work, and they have to understand what they're doing," said Patricia Wasley, the CEO of Teaching Channel, herself a former classroom teacher and onetime Dean of the College of Education at the University of Washington, on the shift to Common Core. "That's a different analytical skill they have to learn."

Kicking things off at the event, Nancy Bromwell, a senior fellow for Common Core systems implementation at the California Department of Education, provided some of the deep context behind Common Core: The standards weren't born in a vacuum, but rather are the result of the work done in states like California over the past 30 to 40 years.

"It used to be about 'minimum competencies,'" Bromwell said, "but in the '90s and '00s we realized maybe that wasn't enough." Later, educators began to focus on boosting student proficiency in skill areas, which has progressed to preparing students for their post-high school futures—whatever they may look like. "While the Common Core standards are a big piece of that puzzle, it's really about modeling the education system to be about college and career readiness," she said. "It is still about building on strong content,



but then helping kids apply that in new and unique situations to emphasize problem solving and critical thinking."

Sharing Strategies, Improving Teaching

Nowhere are the rigors imposed by the Common Core more readily apparent than when working with special student populations, like English language learners, an issue of acute import to California educators who teach an [estimated 1.3 million ELL students](#) a year. However, while the complexity of content ELL students must learn may have increased, their teachers may be in better shape than you might suppose, said Veronica Aguila, the associate director for [California Mini-Corps](#), and an experienced ELL instructor.

"Some of the strategies that were more closely used with English language learners, like scaffolding and having conversations, are now embedded in the Common Core," she explained. The teaching gap between ELL teachers and



those in traditional settings is “closer than it’s ever been. The ELL specialist can actually be a very good resource for the mainstream classroom.”

A Teaching Channel [video Aguila shared](#), highlighting a middle school English language arts lesson for an ELL classroom on the topic of persuasion, exemplified the point. In it, teachers guided students through the unit using a mix of primary language, introduction to rich vocabulary, group work with students of mixed proficiencies, and instruction scaffolding to provide specific support to individual students when needed. And while the strategies presented are important for educators to learn, video—being a primarily visual medium—also helps model behavior for them. “A video like this could be used for professional development for teachers—or with students, if the teacher used clips of it, to demonstrate how to work together.”

Video Makes a Difference

Like the example above, video can be a tool to foster both collaboration and self-improvement. That was the point made by Sarah Brown Wessling, a 15-year veteran of the high school English classroom and the 2010 CCSSO National Teacher of the Year. “Video can be really powerful, especially when we use it as a way to grow,” she said. To illustrate, Brown shared video of a [disastrous, ill-conceived lesson](#) she once taught. After splitting students into groups for an assignment without a clearly set objective, she found them listless and unfocused as she struggled to regain control of the room. Later, after a significant retooling, she shared a version of that same lesson, but with markedly better class engagement. “Students aren’t going to suffer from a single bad lesson,” she said. “What they’re going to suffer from is a teacher who won’t look at her own work and learn from

the students. Looking at our mistakes is really crucial. It’s something in the profession we don’t talk a lot about.”

Learning from others’ mistakes, and successes, also has a real value, Wasley said. “When a teacher watches a film that shows her what the shift looks like in the classroom, she understands it more easily than imagining it while sitting in her classroom without ever having seen it,” she said. Afterward, “when she tries it, she can then videotape herself in action and compare herself to the film of the same shifts and see whether she’s even close.”

To that end, Wasley’s organization has created a private, video-enabled professional learning platform called [Teaching Channel Teams](#), where educators can create and collaborate on videos of themselves and others. (You can see how two different education organizations have customized the platform to suit their own needs online). Specifically, Teaching Channel Teams lets educators:

- Learn on a private, video-enabled platform
- Collaborate in online groups and PLCs
- Share and annotate videos
- Easily upload video via mobile app
- Centralize state, district, and school resources

Restructuring the PD Schedule

A panel discussion that closed out the summit focused, in part, on one innovative way of rethinking professional learning with a true focus on collaboration. Julie Severns, Fresno Unified’s Assistant Superintendent of Professional Learning, detailed how a Gates Foundation Innovative Professional Learning grant and a reallocation of district resources provided Fresno’s middle school teachers with a full day of professional development with their peers every other week. On those PD days, which were staggered by subject,

students worked with a plus teacher on intervention or acceleration instruction, depending on their needs, during their usual instruction time. Meanwhile their regular teachers met in their teams to watch and discuss video, share their experiences and challenges in the classroom, participate in a teacher-driven lesson and module creation session, and discuss how to implement their ideas in the classroom. Throughout the following two weeks, they meet and collaborate in online groups using the Teaching Channel Teams platform, sharing feedback, resources, annotated videos, and student work.

“It’s a different way of approaching professional learning,” Severns said. “It’s less about having a presentation or outside training, and more about teachers digging into the Common Core, their students’ work, and modules and lessons, and then having an opportunity to continue that work both virtually where they can communicate and share resources, and collectively face-to-face.”

As nearly every speaker reiterated, professional learning is a process, not a destination, and the introduction of Common Core, new assessments, and more rigorous competencies is a challenge, but also an opportunity for growth. “I think teaching is really an interesting profession, but it’s also very hard to do well,” Wasley said. “Every year I taught, I wasn’t successful at reaching every child in my room. But every year I taught I had more skills, because every year I would work on building a new set of skills that I hadn’t had before, and that enabled me to get to a few more kids. As a teacher, you have to be growing your skill set because the kids that come to you differ all the time, and they require that you have a really broad repertoire of approaches. You always have to be working at getting better.”

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