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An Educator's Perspective

Five "E's" to Success with Common Core Standards

By Christy M. Neria

As a result of the implementation—and rigor—of the Common Core State Standards, many educators are looking for a different teaching approach to make content accessible to all students. Successful implementation of these standards for deaf and hard of hearing students can be achieved through what I call the "Five E's." These are: Engagement, Encouragement, Expectations, Expression, and Experience.

ENGAGEMENT

It's in the Environment

To develop interest, attention, and motivation to participate in learning, students must first engage. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) report: "Engagement is a predictor of academic performance." Furthermore, Schlechty (2002) suggests "authentic engagement" is key to helping students make meaning, solve problems, and find value in daily learning tasks. Schlechty (2002) notes that authentic engagement must include a student's desire to make meaning, figure out problems, and have an interest in the topic.

What contributing factors within the classroom will foster this type of authentic engagement? Like most educators, I strive to create an engaging academic environment in which my students flourish. Several strategies I use are as follows:

- ***Connect content with what students enjoy or know.*** Use illustrations and initiate discussions about events students have experienced, bring up popular topics, movies, or shared knowledge, and use language students can comprehend while weaving in language about the content.
- ***Invent captivating attention grabbers.*** Create interest in a topic with a related funny anecdote, visual demonstration, image, or video clip.
- ***Promote inquiry.*** Raise questions and seek answers from the students through student-centered discussions.
- ***Use technology***. Use movie-making software to support inquiry and document student work as well as other software for presentations.

Right: Posted signs on students' desks are a positive reinforcement.

Photos courtesy of Christy M. Neria

- ***Support creativity***. Give students opportunities to create outcomes based on their learning (i.e., based on their coursework, they create stories, art, plays, movies, models, documentaries, presentations, group projects, journals, and photos).
- ***Focus on the student***. Listen to and support each student, encouraging his or her ideas and interests.
- ***Enrich the environment***. Make the classroom environment safe and inviting with clear expectations posted, visually appealing walls, printed messages displayed, and comfortable centers to explore, read, and collaborate.

When students are engaged, they participate fully in their learning. For example, when I inform my students that they will make a movie related to the content of a novel after we read it, engagement ensues. As I read, my students pay close attention to the storyline and characters because they know they will reenact the events of the novel themselves, exploring literature through making it into a movie. On completion of reading, the students are led through a variety of pre-writing activities to help them plan for writing their movie script. Their scripts may be based on the novel itself, a parallel theme, or a creation of their own based on the characters from the text. During the week of the performance, students bring in costumes, props, and plans for their roles. When the filming is underway, students direct, collaborate, and decide how to create each scene. Students use either a video camera or Vizzywig, an editing software application for the iPad, to film their creations. When the filming is complete and edited, I transfer their work onto a DVD. Upon completion of the project, the students hold what we call a red carpet event, bringing other students and often their families to view their creations. As students show their films, they take turns reading and signing the text that is woven into scenes to help build fluency in English and American Sign Language (ASL). Through this use of drama and technology, I have engaged the students and made learning fun.

ENCOURAGEMENT

It Begins with the Teacher

As a child, I remember my fourth grade teacher posting a saying on the wall: "I will try!" This mantra followed me into my career as an educator where I, too, promote students giving

new tasks a valiant effort. Tangible encouragement coupled with social and emotional support allow students to believe in themselves as they master the tasks implicit in the Common Core State Standards.

Deaf learners often struggle with literacy and academic language (Luckner, Slike, & Johnson, 2011; Marschark, 2007); therefore, it is critical that educators of deaf and hard of hearing students raise the expectations in the classroom environment through encouraging words and actions. Ways that I make encouragement tangible in my class are by:

- posting signs that say "I will try!" on the walls and desks.
- beginning the day and sometimes each lesson by reminding students to try despite perceived difficulty.
- reminding students of their triumphs throughout the day.
- promoting peer support in the classroom through constructive feedback from classmates and celebrations of achievements.
- reviewing students' growth and learning weekly with teachers and paraprofessionals.

EXPECTATIONS

Clear and Visual

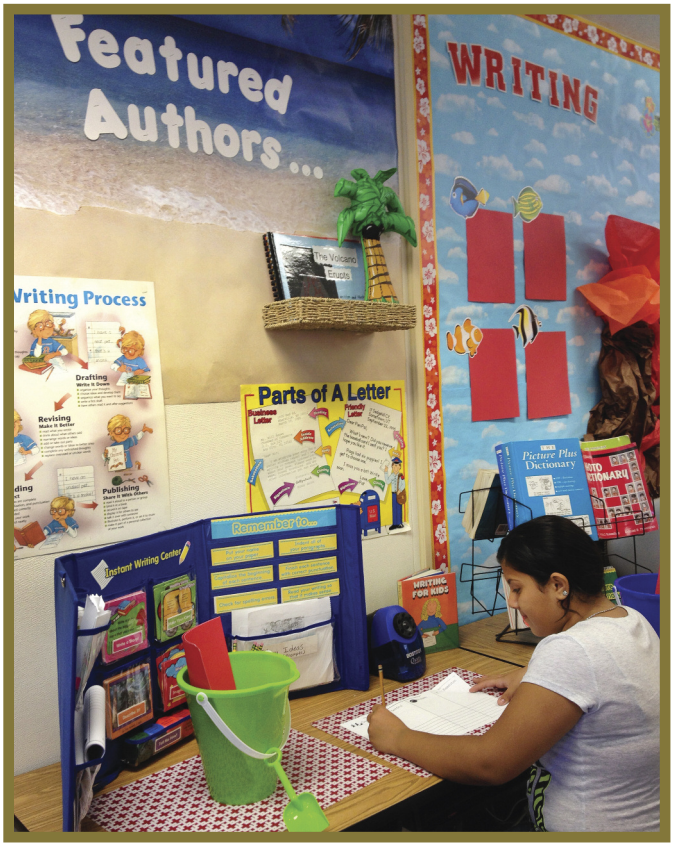
The Common Core State Standards require students' moving from the simple to the more complex (Davis, 2012). In order to help students move along this continuum successfully, educators need to be able to explain processes explicitly while modeling behaviors for inquiry. "Students who are deaf or hard of hearing may need instruction and accommodations in activating background knowledge, organizing how content is presented to them, and direct instruction in important concepts" (Luckner, Slike, & Johnson, 2012). For procedural lessons (i.e., how to solve a math problem or conjugate a verb), educators must make our explanations explicit. Writing down learning objectives rather than just speaking or signing them is critical to ensuring students are exposed to academic vocabulary. Additionally, step-by-step procedures should be clearly defined, modeled, and written on the board to support students visually.

In my classroom, making objectives and steps simple and visually available helps support students' vocabulary acquisition. When students work in small groups, the procedures and objectives are posted for students to see and read. My students see, and are required to read, the academic vocabulary. After going over the vocabulary from the objective several times, students begin to feel more confident when they see the same vocabulary in their textbooks. Overall, by keeping pertinent vocabulary and procedures visually accessible, my students have shown improvement in their ability to read vocabulary in their texts and solve problems systematically.

EXPRESSION

This Comes from Students, Too

"The Common Core State Standards stress the importance of student discovery" (Davis, 2012). Research in cognitive psychology suggests that when students present and explore information, memory and comprehension are heightened (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Thus, student discovery and expression are important factors for educators to consider in their lesson design. Research indicates that young deaf children have a great propensity for creativity during play sequences (Marshark, 2007). Therefore, educators should look for fun, engaging activities that foster student expression to extend learning.



Additionally, the level of understanding of text required by the Common Core State Standards (Kendall, 2011), both narrative and expository, is rigorous. One way I promote student expression in response to various texts is through writing workshops (Calkins, 2006). Students work either in small groups or individually in response to their reading. For example, after teaching a unit on the solar system, my students created their own science fiction stories during writers' workshops. When they learned about the westward movement and read *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder, my students created a parallel historical fiction that was made into a class book and an iMovie. When students are prompted to create something from their newfound content knowledge, they also strengthen their academic language and knowledge base. I promote this type of discovery and self-expression by:

- telling students to "make a movie in their mind." Students think first and try to visualize a sequence or event.
- using the visual arts and telling students to illustrate what they are thinking of for each event or concept.
- having students express through signs and speech what they intended in their art.
- encouraging collaboration in groups, with peers, or with the teacher.
- encouraging student writing, including for students who need to dictate their ideas to someone.
- extending knowledge through creating a personal or class book, an iMovie, or a story to read aloud.

To measure success, students are monitored through each process. If a student is struggling with one of the steps, then we work one-on-one to ensure mastery. For example, if a student is having trouble tapping into prior experiences or knowledge, I will do an activity with that student, or retrieve photos of the student from the family or from a previous event, and then model steps for the student to retrace. Over time, I guide the student from the familiar to the more abstract. Once students realize they can create an idea, the possibilities are endless, and guiding students to move from the concrete to the abstract helps them as they approach the abstract constructs embedded within the Common Core State Standards.

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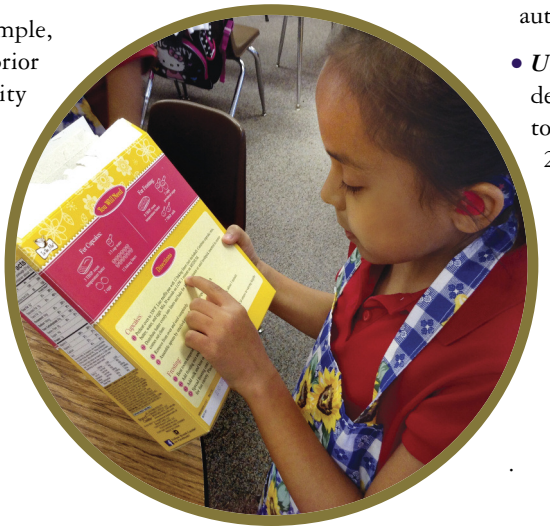

EXPERIENCE

The More and the More Academic, the Better

Academic prowess is enhanced when students experience content firsthand. Marzano (2004) suggests that the more experiences students have with academic content and language, the more successful they will be in the acquisition of background knowledge. Creating experiences in the classroom is key to helping my students understand content. Therefore, when I teach I try to make abstract concepts concrete through student involvement. Here are just a few examples:

- *Creating iMovies:* Students write stories, perform, direct, and edit their movies. Students bring finished DVDs home to enjoy with their families.
- *Re-creating science concepts:* Students act out the water cycle, for example, by having each student represent the sun, water droplets, clouds, and run off and physically interact to demonstrate the sequences of the water cycle.
- *Reenacting historical events:* Students learn about the gold rush, for example, by acting out staking their claim, panning for gold, and writing letters home.
- *Developing word problems:* Students create, act out, and solve word problems in small groups—and videotape the result.
- *Taking class trips:* Students take pictures, write narration, and make class books or movies about these out-of-school ventures.
- *Dancing:* Students create silly and rhythmic movements to develop automaticity with math facts.
- *Using ASL mnemonics:* Students develop stories with ASL handshapes to memorize math concepts (Mullins, 2013).
- *Creating models:* Students choose materials, design, develop, and build content-related models, such as volcanoes, missions, and ecosystems; they might also create a model to make a visual book report.

Putting It All Together

The implementation of the Common Core State Standards puts pressure on everyone—and there is no magical pedagogical equation to ensure students' mastery—but these five principles may be stepping stones in supporting students on this rigorous journey. In order to initially motivate and connect with students, educators must strive for authentic **engagement** (Schlechty, 2002), and this means allowing our students to **experience** learning in a multitude of ways. Along the way, we need to **encourage** students to maintain engagement and emotional and academic investment. Next, we need to clearly delineate **expectations** for each lesson. Further, we need to support student **expression**, creativity, and innovation in order to develop higher-level thinking skills. Finally, students need to experience much of the content area. As the students' primary academic support for meeting the Common Core State Standards, we, as educators, journey with them, making content and delivery accessible for all learners, including those who are deaf and hard of hearing.

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