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## National Standards Movement: Inspiration or Norm?

*Thomas Cloer, Jr.*

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Alan Farstrup, Executive Director of the International Reading Association, gave an interesting keynote address on the new Standards Project for English and Language Arts at the last annual meeting of the American Reading Forum. This project was a collaborative effort of the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, the International Reading Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English. The project was initially funded by the U. S. Department of Education, but the flow from the government spigot has since ceased completely. However, plans are underway to continue and complete the project, the lack of financial flow from the federal faucet notwithstanding.

The purpose of this project, according to Farstrup, is to develop language arts standards concerning what students should know and be able to do in the 21st century. The project is to draw on the best current theory, research, and practice in the learning and teaching of language arts.

Farstrup made it very clear that the project was about content, not assessment. Content ostensibly refers to what all students should know and be able to do. The project would develop challenging learning goals for all students in reading, writing, and oral language. The reading would involve making sense of texts (literature, film, media, illustrations, etc.). The writing involves composing text (print, technical displays, films, etc.). Oral language will focus on listening, speaking, and performance.

Farstrup continued by putting emphasis on high standards for all. "All students should be subjected to the same high standards", he declared. It was at this very point in the presentation that my darn Walter Mitty daydreams started again. Attention Deficit Disorder, my wife thinks. Maybe.

Members of the Forum blinked their eyes and smiled courteously as Alan explained how the project would promote equality of educational opportunity and higher academic achievement for all students. (H-m-m, sounds good). The project would honor diversity in class, gender, language, and ethnicity by developing standards that were so flexible that curriculum planners, administrators, and educational policy makers would simply adapt them to the individual requirements of the different communities throughout America. This was when the dang daydreams kicked in.

*I suddenly found myself a distinguished member of the National Board for Standards in English Language Arts. I looked around and felt the pressure of being in the company of such distinguished people in my field. I opened my sugar-free certs and started sucking; no time to have nervous breath. I saw Richard Anderson from the University of Illinois and Kathy Au from Hawaii. Shirley Brice Heath and then Senator Simon with a lugh red bow-tie sat immediately to my right. I felt a little more nervous than usual. These were really distinguished people; I popped some more certs.*

*As I glanced around the room, I swallowed hard and looked for the water pitchers. Susan Glazer, president-elect of IRA, and Donna Alvermann from the National Reading Research Center smiled politely as my eyes met theirs.*

*"Dr. Cloer, we're delighted you have accepted our invitation to serve in this very important capacity," the chair, Janet Emig, said in her most urbane professorial voice. "Thank you! I'm anxious to write standards," I responded with false bravado.*

*"Now!" Professor Emig said in a manner that reminded me of Bill Buckley on Firing Line. "As most of you know, board members are to review and critique the standards, not write them, as they are developed by the task forces representing early school, middle school, and high school. So, I think it only appropriate that each of us individually contribute at least one insight of discernible profundity."*

*My heart pumped faster; my palms were perspiring. "We'll start with Richard Anderson," she said. "Anyone capable of helping America to quickly become a nation of readers will surely prove a veritable asset in this endeavor." She and Richard smiled and both looked at me.*

At this point, something peculiar happened that is not atypical for me. I started daydreaming in my daydream. Now get the picture.

Here I am daydreaming about being on the national Board for Standards in English Language Arts. As the other Board members get their turns to impress the chair, Professor Emig, I daydream (in my daydream) about Bill Blanton's presentation at the 1993 American Reading Forum. Bill Blanton and I in this inner daydream are practicing Tai Chi, an ancient Chinese exercise emphasizing meditation, relaxation, and balance. Bill had used Tai Chi as a metaphor for multiple pathways to literacy during his presentation at ARF.

*"There are many paths to the mountain peak my son," Bill says as his arms and legs work in circular bicycle-like motion and he stares glassy-eyed into the distance. "You can get to the mountain," he says in his Appalachian State philosophical voice. "But you must pick your own path, my son."*

*I tried futilely to keep my leg cocked as a dog at a fire hydrant. "I can't do this Bill!! Why should I keep trying to do this when I am so obviously inept?" I asked. "Why?" he scowled. "You, a respected mountain-bred boy ask me why? Listen, Elmo, because I'm going to say it only once." Others doing Tai Chi in front of the fountains (you always need fountains) stopped and listened to the philosopher. "Anything really genuinely worth doing," he said as if talking to the distant clouds, "is worth doing poorly when we can't do any better. This, my son, includes art, music, dance, physical activity, Tai Chi and—yes—language arts."*

I am suddenly jolted back to my first tier of daydreaming and my placement on the Standards Board by the words language arts.

*As we continued around the room at the Standards Project, several insights of discernible profundity were delivered by other members of the National Board. One member stated that the standards should focus on content or what all students should know and be able to do. The words "all should know and be able to do" subtracted from the minuscule confidence I had developed in relation to the project. How could this possibly be in synch with "Anything genuinely worth doing is worth doing poorly when one can't do any better?"*

As I clear my head entirely and stop all my daydreaming by listening to Alan Falstrup continue his presentation at ARF, the uncertainties about the project intensify. I hear him say unequivocally that all students should be subject to the same high standards. The information about appreciating and valuing diversity during the implementation of the standards did not allay my concerns that a national curriculum assessed by a national test was a genuine possibility. I thought I was following Falstrup well as he talked about all the professional resources being made available to all (yeah - right) when I fell off the wagon again and lost out to the temptation to daydream.

*A member of the Management Team for the standards project was ranting on about how communities would develop their own standards when another*

board member voiced the old familiar criticism that these new standards would become minimal standards. The rebuttal of that criticism seemed bizarre and contradictory in relation to communities developing their own standards. The response was, "The same high standards would apply to all students."

"Well, just how do you assess your effectiveness with these new high standards?" I asked with a somewhat quivering rattle in my voice. Suddenly, all eyes were on me. "Dr. Clure!" "Cloer," I replied nervously but courteously to the board member who obviously was unfamiliar with me and annoyed by my lack of discernible profundity. "We are not involved with assessment. This is about content, not assessment."

"Yes - but - but," I stammered. "Yes go ahead - please!" the annoyed board member pleaded. "If you say all students should know these things and be able to do them, will you all also agree that anything genuinely worth doing is worth doing poorly when one can't do any better?"

The entire board stared penetratingly and enigmatically at me. One little woman closed her eyes and shook her head as if she had a headache. My chance at discernible profundity had come and gone.

I listened and watched intently as Alan Farstrup ended his session with a tachistoscopic presentation of overheads depicting what the board saw as integrated language use. This reading, writing, and oral language paradigm challenged me to be creative and write at least one standard before I left Sanibel Island. So while the rest of the Forum members frolicked on the beach and/or involved themselves with the Spirit of the Times, I tried to write one standard that met all the laudable criteria, and addressed all the concerns brought forth to date.

As my wife and I left Sanibel and headed north on I-75, I looked anxiously around in the car for my attache case, knowing my writing was inside of it. I found it and gleamed with pride as I read my standard, my only insight of discernible profundity meeting all the criteria, addressing all the concerns, and focusing on integrated language use. The standard takes fully into account planning for the future, pursuit and use of information, thriving in a multi-lingual environment, and moving into the world of work. I wrote this standard, lit this torch, - yes - provided this inspiration only after addressing all the criteria and concerns provided by the National Standards Project. My standard: Communication will occur through symbols (sometimes poorly).