



“*The Amazing Race*”: A Fun Approach to Implementing the Common Core Learning Standards in ELA

SUMMARY

Can depth of learning coexist with joy of learning?

These authors describe how a reality show format functions as a vehicle for addressing new learning standards and instructional shifts in a systematic way.

Rich activities with integrated curricula result in student engagement and progress towards standards.

Observers may think they’ve just

happened upon a taping of the newest season of *The Amazing Race* reality

TV show. Actually, they are joining a group of 26 enthusiastic third-graders at Lake Avenue Elementary School in the Saratoga Springs City School District. These stu-

dents are at work with the *New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy* (CCLS/ELA) — immersed in a unit integrating social studies, literacy and mathematics.

“The world is waiting for you. Good luck. Travel safe. Go!”

**— Phil Keoghan
*The Amazing Race***

With the transition to the CCLS/ELA, developing creative ways to accomplish multiple learning goals has taken on unprecedented significance. These Standards emphasize a *cross-curricular*

focus on English language arts and literacy skills — all in the service of ensuring that students are college and career ready upon graduation. Creative teaching with integrated

curricula can be part of the solution.

Designing *The Amazing Race*

The CCLS emphasize depth of learning. However, depth requires increased time on task, and the scope of curriculum is great.

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Therefore, literacy learning cannot be accomplished during language arts block alone (Lemov, 2010). A way was needed to accomplish multiple objectives at once while expanding students' experiences with literacy across the curriculum. The focus of the unit was social studies — in this case, the study of Italy, past and present.

This unit was developed in response to a prior experience simulating the reality TV game show *Survivor* — piggybacking off an inspired idea from the ninth-grade history department at our high school. Students responded enthusiastically to our adventure with *Survivor*, and they requested a new challenge when it concluded. Thus, our *Amazing Race* was born.

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***New York State Learning Standards
for Social Studies (Elementary Level)
addressed in these activities:***

Standard 2: World History; Key Idea 1 “study...examines the human condition and the connections and interactions of people across time and space and the ways different people view the same event or issue from a variety of perspectives.”

Standard 3: Geography; Key Idea 1 “Geography can be divided into six essential elements which can be used to analyze important historic, geographic, economic, and environmental questions and issues. These six elements include: the world in spatial terms, places and regions, physical settings (including natural resources), human systems, environment and society, and the use of geography” (The University of the State of New York, 1996).

***New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards
for Mathematics (2011) reinforced
during these activities:***

3.MD.5 “Geometric measurement: understand concepts of area and relate area to multiplication and to addition.”

3.MD.6 “Measure areas by counting unit squares (square cm, square m, square in, square ft, and improvised units).”

Challenge Directions

For today’s challenge your team will read informational articles about four cities, discuss the features of each city, and record any pros or cons you discover. Don’t forget to refer to the map to consider *geographical* pros and cons.

1. Challenge: If you had to choose only **one** of these cities to spend a few days in, which one would it be? Prepare your argument with at least three strong points for your city and at least one against each of the other cities in the space below.
2. Be ready to debate/defend your decision with your team and teacher.

	Rome	Turin	Florence	Venice
Pros				
Cons				
Your Argument: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____				

The Amazing Race is a reality show that has aired on CBS since 2001. Teams race one another around the globe following clues and performing tasks. An outline of the activities of our *Amazing Race* are on the following pages. The activities took place daily over the course of three weeks, and demonstrate the Instructional Shifts associated with the CCLS/ELA.

As the activities began, the theme song for *The Amazing Race* beat from Smart Board speakers. Students were placed in heterogeneous groups of three. Each day, students were given different *challenges* focusing on social studies (i.e., Italy) and incorporating a range of CCLS/ELA skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Geometry and measurement were also addressed and reinforced throughout activities. Each day's challenge followed a basic structure.

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CCLS/ELA Standards Addressed in The Amazing Race

RI.3.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

RI.3.2 Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.

RI.3.3 Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.

RI.3.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, at the high end of the grades 2-3 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

W.3.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

W.3.8 Recall information from experiences or gather information from print and digital sources; take brief notes on sources and sort evidence into provided categories.

SL.3.1c Ask questions to check understanding of information presented, stay on topic, and link their comments to the remarks of others.

SL.3.1d Explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion.

SL.3.2 Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

L.3.1 Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

The Amazing Race: Italy

Students:

Analyzed maps and located specific cities.

Read about each city. A variety of reading materials were used. Throughout these activities, opportunities to integrate mathematics were continuously pursued. Students analyzed mosaics, using them to learn about area models, perimeter, and art concurrently.

Discussed the pros and cons of each city from a tourist’s perspective.

Described attributes using content vocabulary.

Constructed arguments supporting their opinion about which of the four cities to visit if given three days and limited funds.

Organized their argument with text-based evidence on a template.

Debated with one another.

Shared their arguments with the teacher during a “Daily Check-in” (see page 17). This included briefly summarizing the text for the teacher and being given a card revealing whether they were “safe” or subject to the detours, roadblocks, or the coveted fast forward.

Detour — Student completes a different task than the rest of the class for the day.

Roadblock — Student completes an additional specific task before reaching the finish line.

Fast Forward — Student has a portion of the day’s task removed from his or her list of duties, making it easier and faster to complete the day’s challenge.

Instructional Shift in Evidence

■ Focus on Evidence in Informational Texts

■ Complex Text and its Academic Language

■ Writing from Sources

Before the transition to CCLS, this classroom was rich in a variety of children’s books (both fiction and non-fiction), but the Standards push the deliberate search for robust and challenging materials even further. For example, in this unit on Italy, books with bold captions and bright pictures now sit alongside dense travel guides, historical pieces about the Renaissance, laminated texts about Italian cars from the manufacturers’ websites, and dozens of other complex non-fiction materials.

Much of the discussion within groups and individually with the teacher allowed for ongoing written and verbal communication. Students were expected to provide text-based support for their responses. The teacher probed for textual evidence instead of tangential reference to the text in addition to connecting to prior knowledge.

Students completed the challenge, returning to the “course” as needed.

Groups were awarded points for crossing the “finish line” only when their work was checked as complete and accurate. The class referred to this as a “speed bump.” They would return to their workstations to revise, discuss, and perfect their work until approved to retire for the day to write in their Travel Journals.

With groups humming along, the teacher had an opportunity to attend to individual student needs and offer additional supports.

Students were continuously assessed on their knowledge and understanding, and required to demonstrate mastery before moving on to more complicated tasks.

■ *Writing from Sources*

■ *Providing Appropriate Scaffolding and Support*

■ *Complex Text and its Academic Language*

One-fifth of the students required Academic Intervention Services in reading and math, and like most classes there was a range of other academic and emotional-social characteristics. This meant that addressing individual needs was critical. Since the activities in our Amazing Race were inherently differentiated, through scaffolding, students took on higher-level activities once they were ready.

All students accessed increasingly complex texts while working in groups and with the teacher scaffolding to support skills. Although leveled texts were part of the daily routine during strategy groups and independent reading time, it was important to provide daily practice with challenging texts that asked students to push their limits.

The selections were brief, allowing for close readings. Even learners achieving at very high levels were challenged to understand new concepts, explore perspectives, and evaluate sources.

The experience of heterogeneous grouping allowed students who struggled with the content the opportunity to discuss and engage with texts. At times, this created productive tension.

The disequilibrium sometimes produced by these challenging materials led to many rewards. The beauty of the complex language inspired them. They cultivated a feeling of curiosity in exploring what they could gain each time they reread and discussed a passage that provided them a key to the daily task.

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The Amazing Race: Italy (cont’d)

Students recorded and reflected on the learning in their independent Travel Journals.

Reluctant writers and students struggling with content were provided sentence starters to guide their entries such as:

“I’m convinced my suggestion for which city to visit is the best choice because...”

Others were able to write reflections and record what they had learned that day without such templates.

Instructional Shift in Evidence

■ Focus on Evidence in Informational Texts

■ Complex Text and its Academic Language

Our Amazing Race presented multiple writing activities. When students write across the curriculum, it enhances their engagement and also enables teachers to be more responsive (Calkins, Ehrenworth & Lehman, 2012).

Differentiated Instruction: Scaffolding for Success and Challenging All Learners

When students needed re-teaching of a concept, evidenced by a brief formative assessment, the teacher pulled those students into a homogeneous group for instruction. Leveled texts were also used to build background knowledge, basic vocabulary and increase the feeling of success for students when the “reach” material was exceptionally challenging. Differentiation was built into tasks when needed. For example, different outlines or organizers were used to support students: pre-labeled, partially labeled, and unlabeled.

Giving all students challenging text and expecting them to comprehend, analyze, and discuss it is doomed to failure unless they are provided with specific scaffolding (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). As part of the shift to the CCLS/ELA, the *Daily Five* and

CAFÉ models for language arts block were utilized (Boushey & Moser, 2006; 2009). Both of these models are structured approaches to teaching and managing language arts instruction.

The *Daily Five* teaches students deliberate strategies for reading to self, reading to someone, listening to reading, working with words, and working on writing. While students participate in the *Daily Five*, the teacher runs strategy groups and individual conferences.

Individual conferences and assessments were based around *CAFÉ*:

Comprehension

Accuracy

Fluency

Expanding vocabulary

All of these components are possible to implement because of the explicit training students are given in independent group work, coaching, and increasing stamina. Students were familiar with

coaching from previous instruction and received more targeted instruction during focus lessons in how to coach one another. They were then guided to transfer these skills to the game-show challenge.

Enrichment opportunities were available to everyone, since the tasks embedded in *The Amazing Race* compelled students to engage with complex texts. With strategies such as “right is right” and “stretch it,” the teacher ensured that students used technical and precise vocabulary (Lemov, 2010). For example, when a student correctly answered a probing question about Galileo’s controversy with the church, he was asked another question to extend his thinking and test the accuracy of his understanding. This example of “stretch it” required the student to return to the text to support his next statement, causing him to reread and think more deeply.

Creating an Amazing Race Climate in School and Around the Dinner Table

Families are an important part of all of our activities. Parents/caregivers were informed about the project through a weekly newsletter. This provided parents with background knowledge on the project and raised great dinner conversation, as reported by parents during conferences. One parent reported that her son argued with her,

Daily Check-in

During *The Amazing Race* activities, the teacher completes a brief “Daily Check-in” with each student, rating each of the following to inform the next steps of instruction:

- Content vocabulary used accurately
- Math concepts understood and applied
- Writing and speaking reveal comprehension
- Writing and speaking reveal text support for arguments
- Writing and speaking reveal integration of ideas
- Command of English language is evident in writing and speaking

“I can’t be out during math because I don’t want to miss the game.” We drew upon family members as resources for our studies. One student’s grandparents visited the class and related their experiences growing up in a small town in Northern Italy.

We created an *Amazing Race* climate — related to our curricular theme. In addition to using the theme song from the show, Euros were awarded for:

- Excellence of thought,
- Completion of homework, and
- Exceptional teamwork.

Euros were counted at the end of the unit to reward a team with a “Lunch Bunch” prize. Lunch Bunch is a time when students are invited to eat lunch in the classroom with the teacher.

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It is not a race, but an Amazing Journey: Let’s Go!

Assessment

Throughout the unit various assessments were used. Each day allowed multiple opportunities for the teacher to meet with groups for conversations about their learning. These dialogues provided insight into the acquisition of language, social studies and mathematical concepts. In addition, other formative assessments were used to track progress, including the entry quiz, the challenges, teacher observations, travel journals, and homework. These assessments also provided data about grammar, spelling, and sentence structure that drove instruction during the alternate language arts block. Language skills were assessed primarily through the daily check-ins and travel journals.

Teacher Reflection: Future Improvements

As we continue to strive toward the ambitious goals of the CCLS, each year offers new opportunities for improvement. The CCLS recognize the important role of writing. Therefore, future units of this nature will incorporate increased writing opportunities to communicate the students’ responses to analyzing text. Students may be encouraged to pursue opportunities through submitting selections from their portfolio for publication to print and online children’s magazines.

In the future, units like this will also involve families at an even greater level. Materials will be shared to encourage exploration outside of school. The classroom website will be updated to include key academic vocabulary, book titles and Web resources families could pursue together. Opportunities to present the unit at the end of the race may also be added.

Concluding Thoughts

The shifts in instruction demanded by the CCLS can seem overwhelming and challenging. However, when approached with an understanding that this is a *process*, teachers can create new experiences and provide previously unimagined opportunities for cross-curricular learning. As this tectonic shift related to the Common Core Standards continues to quake, teachers are finding more ways to improve instruction and activity design and move closer to realizing these goals. The world of the Common Core is ours to explore. It is not a race, but an Amazing Journey: Let’s Go!

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