The Debate Rages On: Great Thinkers and the Common Core Initiative

The modern American education system seems to be in a perilous position. Current debate rages over how to best educate American students and, at a deeper level, how to ensure that our citizens can keep up with the global community. The methodology and purposes of education have been dissected and deliberated for centuries, but still today our country struggles with defining the so-called “correct” approach to learning. A relatively new solution has surfaced in recent years, referred to as the Common Core State Standards or CCSS. The CCSS were drafted by a DC-based non-profit known as Achieve Inc. to standardize English and mathematics curriculum for K-12 students (Robbins 1). The Common Core initiative has several goals, but perhaps the most essential is that it seeks to establish a single set of standards that would be applied to all public schools on a national scale (Robbins 9). This means that, hypothetically, all students in the same grade would be learning the same things at the same time. Underlying all of this is the desire to produce students, who at the end of their formal compulsory education, are prepared to enter either college or the workforce. While seemingly, the Common Core Standards offer an assessment to standardize current education issues, such progressive thinkers like Michel de Montaigne would likely oppose them, while more conservative thinkers like Booker T. Washington would likely support them.

Although the U.S. federal government had nothing to do with the creation of the Common Core standards, they have generally been accepted with open arms at both a federal and
state level. Currently, forty-three states and the District of Columbia have adopted either part or all of the CCSS in K-12 classrooms (“Standards in Your State”). Furthermore, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has praised the CCSS, arguing that they have “the capacity to change education in the best of ways” (Duncan 1). However, it cannot be denied that the approach to education that the CCSS are advocating is something different from previous American education practices. The Common Core initiative wants to ensure that upon completion of the twelfth grade, the American student will know enough to get out into the world and compete globally. In the past, the U.S. education system has posed the question “what should a student know to become an educated citizen?” (Robbins 1). Common Core appears to move our education from a process-based system to a consequence-based system. What might some of the great thinkers of history think of such a shift?

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was an influential French author and essayist, popular during the era of the French renaissance. Montaigne made many important arguments about education: its purposes, its methodology, and what being educated means. His views are generally very modern and somewhat before their time. In one of his essays, entitled “On the Education of Children,” Montaigne presents two primary arguments. First, he posits that the quality of one’s education always trumps the quantity of what one knows in terms of significance. It is better to have a “well-made” head instead of a “well-filled” one (Montaigne 110). Secondly, Montaigne argues that it is unfair and unrealistic to have the same educational expectations for all children, since all children learn differently and at different paces (Montaigne 110).

Taking these two arguments at their base level, it seems clear that Montaigne would oppose the CCSS. In consideration of his first argument, the Common Core initiative conflicts
with quality over quantity. Ideally, it would be best to have both, but requiring a set of standards for each grade level implies that there is a certain quantity of things to be learned each year. Instead of reaching a deep understanding of long division with the understanding that the class would have to forego learning about exponents, the CCSS would rather all the students have a basic understanding of both. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but Montaigne would disagree with it because his educational views favor depth over breadth. In his mind, creating a deeper, more profound understanding of a single topic is superior to simple knowledge of a broad swath of topics. The CCSS contradict Montaigne’s second argument as well. The integral piece of the Common Core initiative is to require that all students have the same educational expectations. This is something that Montaigne seems to oppose in principle. By teaching many children with “a similar measure of guidance,” there will be very few students who “reap any proper fruit from their teaching” (Montaigne 110).

While most of Montaigne’s philosophy on education opposes the concepts set forth by the Common Core initiative, there is one key aspect that he would most likely agree with. The CCSS emphasize critical thinking and comprehension over simple multiple choice methods of determining knowledge. This movement toward reflection on information learned is intended to teach students to “become active, critical, curious, and strategic” (Harvey and Gouvis 434). Montaigne would absolutely view this in a favorable light. One of his biggest concerns about education was that it teaches students to memorize and retell facts without reflecting on what those facts meant. He might argue that thinking critically about what is learned is something that improves upon the simple regurgitation of information that so much of education relies on. Montaigne uses an analogy that compares education to the digestion of food, saying that “it is a sign of rawness an indigestion to disgorge food just as we swallowed it” (Montaigne 111). This
means that in order to truly get the most out of education, the student must be able to examine what was learned.

Another author that would most likely have a strong opinion about the implementation of Common Core standards is Booker T. Washington. Washington (1856-1915) was born into slavery on a plantation in Virginia. He and his family were freed as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and subsequently moved to the poor mining town of Malden, West Virginia. It was here that Washington began his fervent pursuit of education, working during the day and attending classes at night in an attempt to gain as much knowledge as possible. Later into his boyhood years, Washington endured intense poverty in order to attend and work at the Hampton Institute. Clearly he saw receiving an education as something worth suffering for and this colors his views about learning. According to Washington, becoming educated was the most important step in one’s journey to improve oneself. One of his central arguments is that not all valuable education comes from books and the classroom. Washington asserts that some of the most valuable lessons he ever learned came from hard work. To Washington, a good education was one that prepared you to provide for yourself, and both of those served to elevate one’s worth as a person.

Since Common Core strives to prepare students to enter either institutes of higher learning or the work force, Washington would most likely be in support of its implementation. Providing people with the intellectual tools necessary to find suitable employment gives people the chance to better themselves. Thus, an education with the end-goal of “train[ing] for jobs” would be one that is worthwhile (Robbins 9). Washington would probably also agree with the concept of a single set of standards for all students because that would ensure that all of them would have equal opportunity to learn a variety of things. During Washington’s life, people
could only obtain an education if they were financially able, white, or through sheer force of will. So the idea of every public school student having the same chance to learn the same things would most likely be very appealing to him.

However, Washington would likely see one essential piece missing from the CCSS. For Washington, being born into slavery and later living in a poor mining town, performing manual labor was something he considered critical to his educational process (Washington, chapter 2). At the Hampton Institute, Washington worked as a janitor to pay his tuition while attending classes at the same time. He felt that this experience made his education even more valuable. The hard work taught him about himself and of what he was capable. In the modern day, such aspects of manual labor are mostly missing from our education system. Thus, Washington would almost certainly see an omission of a physical or manual labor component from the CCSS as a missed opportunity.

I see merits on both sides of the argument regarding the implementation of Common Core. My primary concern is that by enforcing a set of standards for all students in all states to abide by, the needs of specific neighborhoods, schools, parents, and students will be ignored. This leads me to question the chain of command in such an implementation. The Common Core initiative dictates that the single set of standards would be “controlled by experts in Washington” (Robbins 9). Who decides who these experts are? How can they possibly best assess the needs of a specific state’s students? However, a single set of standards can be appealing in other ways. By requiring all students to know the same information, it would be simpler to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the American education system. By equalizing the measures used to judge America’s students, it becomes easier to see what, how, and when they are learning the best. This
gives us the tools to continue improving our education system. The CCSS has the potential to be either disastrous or transformative.

Both Montaigne’s and Washington’s writings, although published many years ago, still reflect current issues with the American educational system. We still struggle to find a balance between quality and quantity, and we still struggle to find harmony between educating for the workforce and educating for the sake of education itself. The Common Core endeavors to solve both of these problems, but only time will tell if this is the case. Equal standards for all indicate a specific quantity of learning, but an emphasis on critical thinking strives to improve the quality of a student’s understanding. The CCSS also attempt to educate students enough so that they will be prepared to enter either college or the workforce, dependent upon their own decision. At the very least, it is comforting to see that an attempt is being made to answer these age-old questions about how to best educate our citizens.


