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## **“Finding Common Ground with the Common Core”**

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**“Finding Common Ground with the Common Core”**

by Heidi Moisan

More than five years since its rollout, the Common Core State Standards Initiative is still making headlines: “It’s Not Like a Switch That You Can Flick on Overnight: Four Teachers on Adapting to Common Core,” “The new Common Core lie: Parents who opt out are not the problem,” “Quell New York’s Education Firestorm.” These are just a sampling of the articles published the very same week we wrote this Reader Guide. The Common Core remains the hottest topic in education.

Heidi Moisan’s article, “Finding Common Ground with the Common Core,” brings attention to the various ways museums have responded to the Common Core and how the initiative has had an impact on museum education pedagogy. The questions in this Reader Guide are designed to generate a reflective discussion about your institution’s perspective on program development, your own teaching practice, and certain other factors of museum education as they relate to and are influenced by the Common Core.

1. Some museums have leveraged the Common Core to develop school programs from scratch. Other institutions, instead of radically changing their offerings, have found simple ways to convey how they already complement the Common Core, such as [this webpage](#) for the Whitney Museum of American Art. Where does the Chicago History Museum fall along this spectrum of complete change to reframing?
2. What aspects of the Common Core did Moisan and her colleagues find most relevant to their teaching with school audiences? Has your museum tackled the Common Core standards when working with school audiences?
3. What’s the current word on the street from the teachers you work closely with about Common Core standards? Is the Common Core driving instructional priorities? How is it shaping their classroom teaching?
4. Let’s compare Moisan’s perspective to other voices from the field. Moisan believes museum educators need to balance the open-ended nature of informal learning and pre-set school agendas, while Carol Ng He, in her [introduction to this JME issue](#), suggests that we need to make deeper connections to grade level standards in our programming. Ben Garcia, Deputy Director of the San Diego Museum of Man, on the other hand, suggests in a [previous JME issue](#), that museums stop trying to meet standards and just concentrate on “what we do best,” which he describes as the unique open-ended learning that inspires higher order cognitive development.

Of these three approaches, which resonates most closely with your own views and experience? Do your colleagues feel differently?

You can find more discussion and resources about the relationship between schools and museums on Rebecca Herz's [Museum Questions](#) blog.

5. Do you think the Common Core has had or will have a lasting impact on museum education? How so?

**Resources cited:**

Ben Garcia, "What We Do Best: Making the Case for Museum Learning in its Own Right," *Journal of Museum Education* 37, No. 2, (2012): 47-56.

Rebecca Herz, "Exploration: Schools and Museums," *Museum Questions* (blog), <http://museumquestions.com/exploration-schools-and-museums>.

Carol Ng He, "Common Goals, Common Core: Museums and Schools Work Together," *Journal of Museum Education* 40, No. 3, (2015): 220-226.

"School and Educator Programs Connect to Common Core State Standards," *Whitney Museum of America Art*, <http://whitney.org/Education/K12/CommonCore>

# Finding Common Ground with the Common Core

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Heidi Moisan

**Abstract** This article examines the journey of museum educators at the Chicago History Museum in understanding the Common Core State Standards and implementing them in our work with the school audience. The process raised questions about our teaching philosophy and our responsibility to our audience. Working with colleagues inside and outside of our organization allowed us to experiment with new approaches to student programming. The workshop “Painted Memories: The Great Chicago Fire” marks our first student program created after the full implementation of the Common Core and is a departure for us with its focus on American art.

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The Chicago History Museum is dedicated to serving the school audience through student visits, teacher professional development programs, and classroom resource materials. Our relationship with this important group of constituents has evolved over time as has our approach to meeting their needs. Both are informed by institutional changes and the national conversation around formal education and the Common Core State Standards.

## Developing an Experiential Learning Model

Engaging with the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) at the Chicago History Museum is best understood in the context of major institutional shifts and changes in our practice that pre-date CCSS but set the stage for the approach we took when integrating the standards in our school offerings. In 2006, the Chicago History Museum re-opened after an extensive renovation of our public spaces. During construction we formed an inter-departmental

team tasked with re-imagining the school visit experience. We decided to move away from a passive “talk and tell” guided tour program to an experiential learning model that led to the creation of a fleet of History à la Cart stations. These six interactive stations engage children’s minds and bodies and encourage both individual discoveries and collaborative learning during 20-minute facilitated activities.

With the History à la Cart fleet solidly established, we were ready to add additional opportunities to our field trip program. Feedback from teachers on post-visit surveys indicated interest in more in-depth experiences during their visits. Also during this period, the museum was implementing a strategic plan that identified school groups as a target audience. With this institutional energy behind us, we spent a year developing and testing two student workshop programs. For elementary students, we developed *The Wonderful World’s Fair* and for middle and high school students, *Facing Freedom*. These workshops emphasize object-based learning, and students use a variety of historical sources from the museum’s collection to analyze and interpret local and national historical events. Student voice and peer-to-peer teaching are important elements of both programs. The workshops were immensely popular, virtually selling out, and we concluded there was room to grow.

## **Straddling the Worlds of Informal and Formal Learning**

During the testing phase of the workshops we were aware of CCSS and knew that Illinois had committed to implementing them. We decided that we needed to familiarize ourselves with the standards, so we could determine how our work connected to them and the implications they had for our audience. The work of museum educators is a delicate balancing act, since our professional practice straddles two worlds — that of informal and formal learning. To truly know and understand our audience of teachers and students, we need to stay informed and knowledgeable of the mandates and initiatives making their way into the classroom. We also need to plan programs and develop resources that live out the museum’s mission and stay true to the strengths of informal learning. As Beverly Sheppard writes, “Just as we want our school visitors to learn, we want them to be filled with wonder at a world that reveals strange new things, that fuels curiosity, and invites them to explore images and ideas that move them beyond the familiar. We want them to feel welcome and empowered in this place called a museum, and to

use their own questions to look more deeply and perhaps more critically.”<sup>1</sup> We knew that our way forward was to integrate the new standards into our work in meaningful ways that allowed for experiential learning and affective engagement that is crucial to the Chicago History Museum program experience and a hallmark of the resources we develop.

At the time of this writing, while 43 states have adopted CCSS, it is a source of a passionate national political debate. Several states including Indiana and Oklahoma have dropped CCSS and are creating new state standards, while others are undergoing a review process to determine their continued involvement. It is evident that the numbers of states participating in CCSS will continue to shift as further debate and decision making occurs.

## Moving Forward while the National Conversation Continues

Despite this fluctuation in participation, CCSS has greatly influenced educational practices in this country. It has shaped national content area standards which have aligned with CCSS in the arts and social studies. For example, the National Council for the Social Studies publication “*Social Studies for the Next Generation*” includes a chapter devoted to the connections between the council’s College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework and CCSS. And even states who never adopted CCSS or joined and then withdrew, are creating new standards with similar “college and career” readiness goals and aims as those expressed by CCSS. Illinois adopted CCSS in 2010 and began full implementation during the 2013–14 school year.

While we keep abreast of the changing landscape, given the impact CCSS has had on national standards and that our home state has implemented them, Chicago History Museum’s education staff determined that we would move forward in our integration of CCSS into our programs and resources. For the teachers and students with whom we work most closely, CCSS is the foundation of their daily educational experience which makes it a priority for us as well. We eagerly took the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the standards and to move our work with them forward when we joined a multi-year initiative led by the Terra Foundation for American Art. American Art at the Core of Learning had three prongs: establishing a community of museum educators, creating CCSS-aligned classroom resources, and potential funding for participants’ CCSS and American art projects.

In closely examining CCSS English Language Arts (ELA) standards, we realized two important things: first, in many ways they feel familiar to us, and second, the standards embrace domain-specific literacy. The standards for reading informational text at the elementary levels ask students to engage deeply with text to develop critical-thinking skills. These include questioning, citing evidence, understanding the main idea, identifying key details, comprehending point of view, and comparing and contrasting texts on the same topic. As a history museum, using a variety of texts from the collection with students has always been part of our practice. The literacy skills identified in CCSS complement those necessary to the study of history, deeply engaging with the historical record through questioning — as well as understanding point of view, purpose, and the context in which the document or image was created. At the 6–12 grade levels the standards are more discipline specific. “Informational text” becomes “primary and secondary sources.” Students are asked to use multiple texts and text types, including visual information, and to distinguish between fact and opinion.

These practices are not new to us: they have been integral to our programs and resources for many years and have helped pave the way for our integration of CCSS. For example, at our Prairie History à la Cart station, elementary students read excerpts from the written accounts of three Illinois settlers who describe vastly different reactions to the landscape. Students compare the writings and discuss what may account for the differences of opinion. During this experience, they work with primary sources, citing explicit evidence from the text, comparing multiple texts on the same topic, and assessing point of view.

## Considering New Possibilities for CCSS Centered Student Experiences

Thanks to support from the Terra Foundation for American Art, we were able to take on the challenge of designing a student program around American art and CCSS. The result, *Painted Memories: The Great Chicago Fire*, is unique in our workshop offerings. Rather than drawing on many objects, it revolves around one piece, the painting *Memories of the Chicago Fire, 1871* by Julia Lemos. Lemos lived through the fire, and many years later, in 1912, she created this work and recorded her experience in a written account. We geared this program for third- and fourth- grade students. These grades focus on Chicago and Illinois history and make up 49 percent of all student field trips to the museum.

Prior to their visit, we email the teacher the article *Chicago Burns!* This informational text and its accompanying activity, which involves writing and drawing in response to the reading, establishes background knowledge and begins the integration of CCSS within an interdisciplinary art and social studies experience.

The workshop begins in the exhibition *Chicago: Crossroads of America* in front of the Norman Rockwell painting, *Mrs. Catherine O'Leary Milking Daisy*. There, we have a conversation with students using the painting to elicit discussion of the myth of the cow kicking over the lantern. Rockwell was not born at the time of the fire, but the legend of the cow was so famous that he chose to paint it in 1935. This gives us an opportunity to explore point of view as we move to the Lemos painting and discuss what we might learn differently from an artist who lived through the event. We treat the Lemos painting as a text, asking students to choose a detail they find interesting and record it on a simple organizer (Figure 1). We use student-volunteered details to conduct a close reading of the painting, discussing what those specifics tell us about the fire and also noting the artistic choices Lemos made with line, shape, color, and composition that contribute to our conclusions (Figure 2). This process integrates CCSS skills identified in Reading Anchor Standard 1: "Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text."<sup>2</sup> We inform students that we are going to bring Julia's painting to life by acting out the details they have identified. Students use their organizer to make notes on how to express their detail through movement (Figure 3).

From the gallery, we move to a museum classroom. Seated in small groups, students spend a few minutes discussing their details and acting ideas. Student volunteers share their details (which are circled and noted on a smartboard projection of the painting) and demonstrate how to act them out. We accumulate details and then the whole group acts out the list, while a facilitator weaves the details together in an oral story. This portion of the workshop uses movement as a powerful and stimulating learning tool. Coupling verbal information with actions, it emphasizes peer-to-peer teaching (Figure 4). Pérsida Himmele and William Himmele describe the benefits of kinesthetic learning: "Whether it be for the sake of the linkages between movement and memory, or for the sake of gender or other learner differences, the use of movement within your lessons can enhance learning for your students while providing you with evidence of active participation and cognitive engagement."<sup>3</sup>



## Memories of the Chicago Fire in 1871

Artist: Julia Lemos



**Find a detail!**

What do you notice? Write it down or make a quick sketch.



**Act it out!**

How can you use your body to act-out your detail?



I would...

Move  
around  
like  
the  
smoke

Figure 1 Student Gallery Worksheet. After examining Julia Lemos's painting, students use this organizer to identify a detail of interest and consider how to express it through movement. Chicago History Museum Education Department.



Figure 2 Photograph of kids in the exhibition in front of the Lemos painting. The students' observations become a springboard for discussing and analyzing the painting. Photograph by Stephen Jensen for the Chicago History Museum.

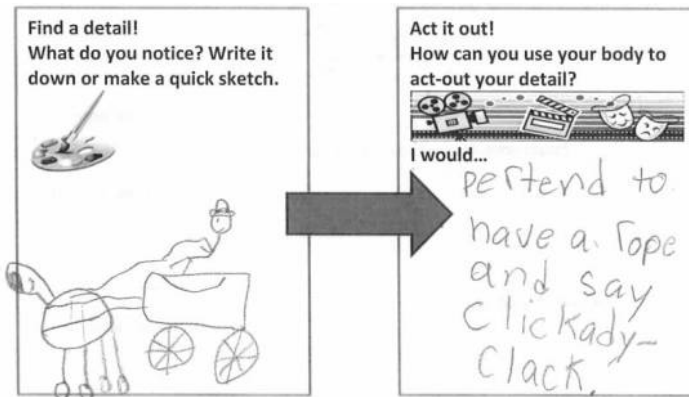


Figure 3 Detail of student worksheet: horse/wagon drawing and acting notes. A student's selected detail and notes on acting. Chicago History Museum Education Department.



Figure 4 Photograph of students acting. As a group, students bring Lemos's painting to life by acting out details from it. Photograph by Joseph Aaron Campbell for the Chicago History Museum.

Next, a student volunteer reads aloud a portion of the Lemos memoir. A discussion follows comparing her writing to her painting. Students find references from her writing in the painting, which they circle on the smart board (Figure 5), and discuss the ways in which her writing sheds new light on her experience.

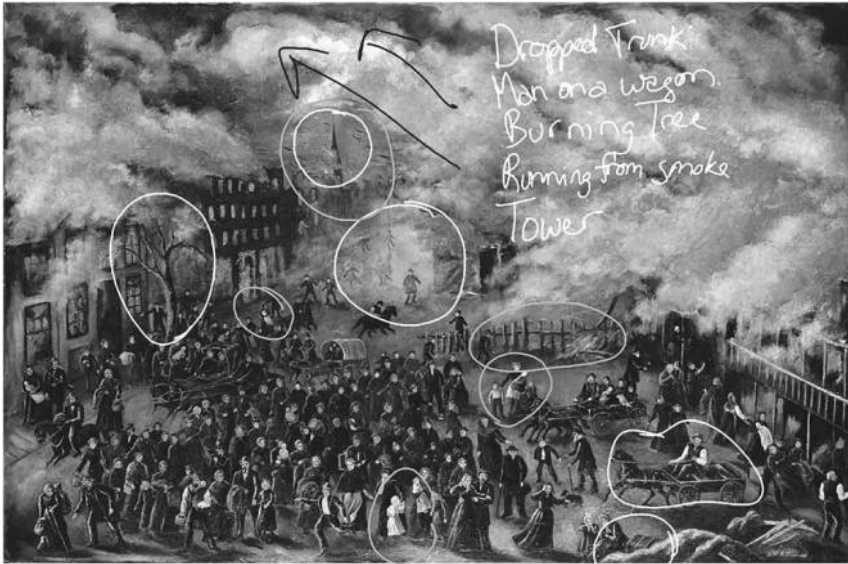


Figure 5 Image of the Lemos painting annotated by students. Students use a smartboard to annotate an image of the painting with their details as well as elements identified in the artist's written account. Chicago History Museum Education Department.

The experiences of collaboratively acting out the story of the painting and comparing the painting with the artist's written excerpt integrate several important CCSS standards. Working together to share details and ideas for expressing them as actions involves students in Speaking and Listening Anchor Standard 1: "Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively."<sup>4</sup> Using the painting and the written account enables students to "integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words" — CCSS Reading Anchor Standard 7.<sup>5</sup>

The program concludes with students creating a cover for a Chicago Fire narrative, which connects to the post-visit activity of collaboratively authoring fire books. Pages provided by the Museum contain images from the collection with associated writing and drawing prompts.

During the 2013–14 school year we facilitated 76 fire workshops serving 1,871 students. We worked with MEM & Associates to assess the workshop using a developmental evaluation approach. The goals for the evaluation were twofold, first to assist museum staff in understanding how best to work

with art in the context of our history museum (a new approach for us), and second to discover what students focus on and learn when asked to analyze and produce works of art that contain history messages.<sup>6</sup> We collected data through workshop observations, teacher surveys, and analyzing student work.

## Core Outcomes

The Painted Memories workshop was designed to provide students with an inquiry-based experience using art to develop an understanding of a key event in Chicago history and aligning with CCSS ELA skills in both reading and speaking and listening. The evaluation specifically looked at how students applied CCSS during the program. The overall conclusion of the evaluation found that “students were on task in practicing essential reading and writing skills such as finding details, drawing inferences, and providing evidence for their interpretations of art works and history.” Furthermore, “there is evidence that access to the learning environment provided by the Museum and engaging in collaborative, social learning that is a feature of museum education resulted in students who were highly engaged and on task.”<sup>7</sup>

During observations, we collected data on student interactions with art, history, and CCSS. Observers were asked to rank specific behaviors on a four-point scale, with four being the most descriptive. Twenty-three observations were completed. Three key student interactions with art emerged: spending time looking at art and pointing out details (3.8), referencing the artwork in discussions (3.26), and interpreting conditions, characteristics, feelings, and emotions based on features of the artwork (2.96). In considering engagement with history, two behaviors rose to the top: identifying items from the past (3.16) and looking for evidence to support claims (3.26). In observing students’ use of CCSS ELA skills, four ranked highest: building on one another’s ideas and articulating understandings based on comments from others (3.17), citing details and evidence in the painting and written account (3.65), making logical inferences (3.09), and presenting findings and supporting evidence during group discussion (2.96).<sup>8</sup>

In teacher surveys, respondents were asked to review a list of CCSS skills and choose those that their students used during the workshop. Of 21 teachers who responded, 86 percent felt that their students used diverse media to evaluate content; 86 percent indicated that students made logical inferences, citing details and identifying themes in a work of art and written excerpt; and finally 71 percent said that students presented findings and supportive evidence

during group discussion. Approaching the painting as a text was especially appreciated; one teacher wrote: “I really enjoyed looking at the two different paintings and picking out the details. Often students are asked for details from a story but this gave a new perspective.” Some teachers commented on the format and nature of the workshop; for example, one noted that the workshop “incorporated a variety of learning entry points, including movement, drawing, making observations, and writing.”<sup>9</sup>

However, while the evaluations were overwhelmingly positive — 94 percent indicated that they would bring students back for the program — one thoughtful teacher wrote: “It was engaging and fun and interactive and allowed students to express themselves, but I’m not sure it really and truly hit CCSS.”<sup>10</sup> CCSS is new for all of us. What does it look like in practice? What “counts” as CCSS? This teacher’s reflection gets at the essence of the differences between informal and formal learning environments. Our intention as museum educators is to complement and build on classroom learning, not to replace or replicate it. CCSS does not mandate a curriculum; rather it lays out what students should be able to do at the conclusion of each grade level. This shift toward skills-based standards is a dramatic change for classroom teachers and possibly an area where museums can offer assistance. Continued conversation and collaboration around CCSS is needed for educators in both environments to understand and appreciate one another’s practice.

Storytelling is at the core of history and that is the heart of our mission: “We share Chicago’s stories, serving as a hub of scholarship and learning, inspiration and civic engagement.”<sup>11</sup> The artwork, artifacts, photographs, and documents in our collection depict history in ways that are vivid and memorable for students. Our programs and resources encourage students to critically engage with history, asking why things happened instead of memorizing rote facts. One teacher captured this perfectly in her survey: “It was great for them [my students] to do more than just learn facts. They really got to make their own meaning from primary sources.”<sup>12</sup> This type of meaning-making is central to the study of history, but also fundamental in the purpose of CCSS. The introduction to the standards imagines a college- and career-ready student: “They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens world views. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private and public deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic.”<sup>13</sup> Our experience has shown us that CCSS is compatible both with our mission and our practice.

We have found common ground with Common Core. Education staff members look forward to bringing our wonder and curiosity to future collaborations with teachers to develop CCSS-centered experiences that engage and empower students.

### Notes

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### About the Author

Heidi Moisan, school programs manager at the Chicago History Museum, works extensively with the school audience, creating curriculum materials, coordinating a teacher advisory board, and facilitating programs. In 2008, Great Chicago Stories, which Moisan led, received several national awards. She has presented at many conferences, including the 2012 Illinois Association of Museums and the 2011 Association of Midwest Museums.

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