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ARMONK, NEW YORK

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**Title of Project:** *Using the NYS ELA Modules on Evidence-Based Claims and Greek Mythology to Enhance Students' Mastery of the Common Core Standards*

**Year:** 2014

**School/Grade:** H. C. Crittenden Middle School / Grade 6

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SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**Context:**

We have been teaching the sixth grade literature curriculum collaboratively for the past ten years. We teach approximately 190 heterogeneously grouped students. We have always created authentic curriculum and assessments which reflect the NYS standards and assessments, and our students have historically excelled, with at least 90% of students scoring a level 3 or 4 on NYS assessments from 2006-2012. However, with the advent of the 2013 NYS Common Core ELA Assessment, we knew we needed to research and make the appropriate changes to our curriculum, instruction, and assessments to prepare students for the increased complexity of the texts and tasks demanded by the Common Core.

We were intrigued by the new [NYS ELA modules](#) which were made available in the spring and summer of 2013. After surveying the modules, our initial impression was that they had value in that they were thoughtfully designed to address the Common Core Standards. Our performance on the 2013 ELA demonstrated that our English Language Arts curriculum had prepared our students well for these assessments, (76% of students scored a level 3 or 4 on the NYS Common Core Assessment in 2013, down from 90% in 2012). Despite our relative success on these exams compared to other districts, we are always seeking ways to improve. We wanted to explore how the new curriculum modules could enhance our existing curriculum to address the new Common Core Standards without abandoning what we know to be good practice.

**Action Plan:**

To address the new demands of the Common Core, our research questions were as follows:

1. What types of learning activities are available in ELA Module 1 to help students master the

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specific Common Core Standards RL. 6.1<sup>1</sup>, RL. 6.2<sup>2</sup>, W.6.1a<sup>3</sup>?

2. How can Grade 6 ELA Evidence Based Claims (EBC) Module be integrated into our existing short story curriculum to increase student mastery of the Common Core Standards RL. 6.1, RL. 6.2, W.6.1a?
3. How can Grade 6 ELA Module 1 be used to enhance our current Greek Mythology unit and increase student mastery of the Common Core Standards RL. 6.1, RL. 6.2, W.6.1a?

To begin our inquiry, we re-examined the Common Core Standards in depth. Of course, we had studied them, and analysed and adjusted our curriculum for the past several years, but it was not really until we saw the 2013 NYS assessments that we realized the extent to which we would need to modify our curriculum and instruction to align with the new standards. For example, the short responses on the Common Core tests require students to make a claim and back it up with two details from the text. Previous NYS assessments only required students to answer the question with two details or a valid inference and a detail. Creating “evidence-based claims” was not language we had previously used with students, so we began our inquiry with examining the Evidence-Based Claims module<sup>4</sup>, created by Odell Education. Instead of using the text provided, we decided to adapt this module into our existing short story unit, incorporating the skills of the unit to the classic stories we have taught and loved for years.

We also decided to review [NYS ELA Grade 6 Module 1](#)<sup>5</sup>, created by EngageNY, because we had already taught a unit on Greek Mythology using one of the featured texts (*D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*) and we knew that that unit in particular needed revision to align with the Common Core Standards. Furthermore, the core text, *The Lightning Thief*, was a challenging, high interest novel that our sixth graders would enjoy.

*Research Question #1: What types of learning activities are available in ELA Module 1 to help students master Common Core Standards RL. 6.1, RL. 6.2, W.6.1a?*

NYS ELA Grade 6, Module 1 is titled Myths: Not Just Long Ago. The unit is a foundational unit which established classroom routines, including setting learning targets for each lesson, creating collaborative group guidelines, utilizing close reading strategies, and implementing strategies for

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<sup>1</sup> CCLS RL. 6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

<sup>2</sup> CCLS RL. 6.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

<sup>3</sup> CCLS W.6.1a Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

<sup>4</sup> "Grade 6 ELA - Making Evidence-Based Claims Unit ..." 2013. 28 May. 2014

<<http://www.engageny.org/resource/grade-6-ela-making-evidence-based-claims-unit>>

<sup>5</sup> "Grade 6 ELA Module 1 | EngageNY." 2013. 28 May. 2014 <<http://www.engageny.org/resource/grade-6-ela-module-1>>

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assessing learning outcomes at the end of each lesson and unit. Some learning activities we found particularly helpful include:

- Triad talk expectations: students establish guidelines for their groups
- Anchor charts (Eg: Things Close Readers Do, Making Inferences About Percy)
- Topics of universal themes (to determine a topic versus a theme)
- Theme versus thematic statement
- Using details to develop a theme
- Question baskets (to stimulate discussion of the previous night's reading)
- Word catchers (graphic organizer for students to record new vocabulary words)
- Paired writing assignments
- Carousel Walk (Quotes posted around the room for students to respond to with textual evidence on a post-it)
- Using annotated model essays in writing instruction

Data was collected throughout the year to determine if implementing the strategies taught through the Evidenced-Based Claims Module and Module 1 were effective. Data included:

**Evidence-Based Claims Module data:**

*Research Question #2: How can Grade 6 ELA Evidence Based Claims (EBC) Module be integrated into our existing short story curriculum to increase student mastery of the Common Core Standards RL. 6.1, RL. 6.2, W.6.1a?*

To address this research question, we gathered data from written assessments (pre-assessment, formative, and summative), exit tickets, and a focus group.

- Pre-assessment: Compare two poems without being taught the structure of an evidence-based claim.
- Formative assessments: Evidence-based claims paragraphs about *The Ransom of Red Chief*, and the *Tell-Tale Heart*.
- Summative assessment: Evidence-based theme essay based on new text not discussed in class.
- Exit tickets: student self-reflection
- Focus group: panel of mixed ability students

**Module 1 data:**

*Research Question #3: How can Grade 6 ELA Module 1 be used to enhance our current Greek Mythology unit and increase student mastery of the Common Core Standards RL. 6.1, RL. 6.2, W.6.1a?*

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To address this research question, we gathered data from written assessments (pre-assessment, formative, and summative), exit tickets, and a focus group.

- Formative assessment: Paragraph analyzing *The Lightning Thief* as it relates to “The Hero’s Journey”<sup>6</sup>
- Summative assessment: Extended response essay comparing the themes found in *The Lightning Thief* to the themes in the classic myth of *Prometheus*
- Exit tickets: student self-reflection
- Focus group: panel of mixed ability students

**Results:**

There were many important findings about our teaching practices through the research we conducted this year. Teaching the evidence-based claims module early in the fall using the texts we already read in the short story unit proved very successful. For the first time in ten years, we delayed jumping in and teaching a five paragraph essay (extended response) in order to focus on paragraph writing (short response) for several months. We used the language found in this module consistently throughout the year. The results of this were extremely positive. With all the paragraph practice, we found that midway through the year, students were extremely confident when asked to write a paragraph on demand. Not only did students understand the structure of a well-developed paragraph and how to approach it with little to no assistance, but students were writing more, and most importantly, students were developing a claim and backing it up with clear evidence from the text. Most importantly, spending more time with paragraph writing proved a wise decision as we found that when it was time to teach the five paragraph essay, it was a very natural extension of the evidence-based claim unit. Most students were able to produce essays easier and with less anxiety than in past years because they already understood how to create body paragraphs (which we explained are very much like evidence-based claims paragraphs where the writer proves a claim unique to that paragraph).

Some of the most important pieces of data we collected came from the students themselves. This data gave us special insight into what students were thinking about their own writing. We conducted a focus group and an exit ticket that asked students for honest feedback. Students were asked a number of questions in order to self-assess and reflect on their own writing. Nearly every student

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<sup>6</sup> "Grade 6: Module 1 Overview - EngageNY." 2013. 28 May. 2014  
<<http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/6m1.1.pdf>>

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claimed to have improved his or her writing in some way. This is consistent with the improvement we saw from the pre-assessment all the way through the first essay taught using Module 1.

The following statements from students illustrate how they also saw improvement in their writing:

*“I think my writing has improved a lot this year. Some things that have helped me are just writing more often. It’s also helped me because sometimes when we write together, I feel like I am learning now to write from other people too.”*

*“My writing has improved because my details are better and stronger than last year. Even though I don’t like doing practice paragraphs, that helps me get more experience.”*

*“Writing now comes more naturally because I’m used to it.”*

*“My writing has improved this year because I am making inferences, where as last year my writing was very literal. This year the writing outlines have helped me the most. They have also saved me time while taking a timed test.”*

*“My writing has improved this year by really learning the structure of writing and using details and support to my advantage when writing. For example, I have seen a growth in my writing level because of how I am supporting my claim with very helpful details. Something that has helped me the most this year to improve my writing is the repetition of writing paragraphs and essays. It helps because it helps make my essays and paragraphs better each time I write a new one.”*

Students were also asked if they felt prepared for this year’s NYS ELA assessment and if they needed more practice. Around 80% of students felt they were well-prepared, while some students expressed the need to have more practice using evidence in their writing. One student said the following:

*“I feel prepared for the ELA tests because I know everything that goes into the essay. What I need to work on is grammar and spelling. I have learned from my mistakes and I think I can do well on the test.”*

We received some feedback from the focus groups conducted in December after the evidenced-based claims was concluded and while we were in the midst of teaching parts of ELA Module 1. In response to the question, “What is your confidence level with your writing at this point in the year? Do you feel you have improved since September?” many students reported that they had better use of quotes and details as evidence to prove a claim. They also said that their word choice had improved.

In order to quantify some of our data, we decided to look at a small sample of students. We

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specifically looked at an equal amount of work from 12 students whose ELA scores ranged from 1 to 4. On the evidence-based claims paragraphs from the EBC module, 10/12 students scored a 2 on the NYS Common Core Standards short response rubric. We discovered that the students that seemed to make the most growth were the weaker students (students who had earned a 1 or 2 on the previous year's ELA test). It seemed that those students in particular benefited from the repetition and the structure introduced to them from the EBC module. In the pre-assessment, more than half of those students did not start out a paragraph with a claim, nor did they have sufficient details to prove a point. More advanced students also made noticeable growth in that their essays and paragraphs got progressively more detailed (with specific quotes and explanations) and focused on a particular claim as the year went on. Our summative assessment for this unit was an evidence-based theme essay on a new text which had not been read or discussed in class. This assessment also provided our APPR local assessment data. 91% of the students met the goal of a score of 22 (equivalent to a 3 or better on the Common Core ELA rubric), even though the task was more challenging in comparison to prior years.

Module 1 proved to be a natural extension (in terms of writing) to the EBC module. Throughout this unit, students were asked to be extremely analytical of a text and therefore analytical in their writing in order to prove a claim with specific quotes from the text. This prepared students for the NYS ELA assessment as students were now not only writing paragraphs (short response), but writing full essays (extended response). On the formative and summative evaluations for Module 1, all twelve students surveyed (including weaker students) scored a level 3 or 4 on the NYS Common Core extended response writing rubric. Anecdotally, it seemed that this year more than ever before, students were able to write a long essay (extended response) with more ease and less anxiety due to the progression of the writing instruction.

Two of our focus group questions solicited student feedback on the lessons in Module 1, to address their perceptions regarding research question 1: *What types of learning activities are available in ELA Module 1 to help students master Common Core Standards RL. 6.1, RL. 6.2, W.6.1a?* Students felt that *The Lightning Thief* was a good introduction to the mythology unit because it was interesting: "it's a good book--kids like reading it." They thought the questions and comparisons were "good," i.e. comparing Percy the protagonist to the archetypal hero in "The Hero's Journey." Even students who had read the book before felt the questions were "new and kept me thinking." They were "not bored reading it a second time."

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Also, students felt the learning targets presented at the beginning of the lessons in the module “helps us know what it’s about. ” Other students mentioned they like how “they give information for what you’ll do in class” and “set a goal.”

**Implications:**

We are confident that the modules provided us with some great ideas and instructional materials to include in our writing instruction. We have concluded that focusing more on writing evidence-based claims paragraphs early in the year was beneficial for our students at all ability levels. This focus has led students to more easily transition into writing full-length essays midway through the year. Most students have shown growth in their writing and have directly expressed gaining confidence in their ability. It has become second nature for students to go back to the text for evidence to prove a claim.

Moving forward, we want to continue to teach evidence-based claims early in the year, followed by some elements of the mythology module. Moving the mythology unit up in the year allowed us to focus more analytically on writing and reading. Next year we would like to see how we can further integrate some of Grade 6 ELA Module 1 into our existing *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and *Giver* units while continuing to help students master the common core analytical writing standards.

We learned that some of the most important research was the honest feedback of students in the form of focus groups and exit tickets. Students were asked to be honest and in turn they provided needed insight to either validate some of our new teaching practices, or help us to analyze and modify some aspects of our instruction.

Working with these rather new and untested modules brings up many questions for further research.

- Are there any other parts of the modules that should be integrated into our existing curriculum?
- What new modules are being developed and are they a valid teaching tool?
- Over time, will the integration of some aspects of these modules help improve student performance on ELA assessments?

We will continue to examine and reflect upon these questions in an effort to prepare our students as best we can for the new and increasingly complex common core standards.