

# BUILDING BETTER LESSONS

TEACHERS FIND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE THEIR PRACTICE

By Julia Harris

**J**ulie McGough, a 5th-grade teacher at Victor Hodge Elementary School in Azusa, Calif., calls herself as a “pretty good teacher,” while at the same time admitting that when she changed from grades 2 and 3 to 5th grade, she was somewhat uncomfortable with one subject in particular.

“I was actually very intimidated by the math,” she said. “I knew how to do it, but I didn’t know how to explain it to students.”

And then she found out about LearnZillion.

Ask Katie Bryant, an 8th-grade physical science teacher in Georgia, what scared her the most about the new Common Core literacy standards, and she’ll tell you: “They wanted us to incorporate more reading and writing into our curriculum.”

The concept intrigued Bryant, but she was not sure how to implement it with her students. “I feel like I used to do writing for the sake of writing, without a real purpose,” she says.

All of that changed when she was invited to take part in an initiative called the Literacy Design Collaborative.

## GRAPPLING WITH COMMON CORE

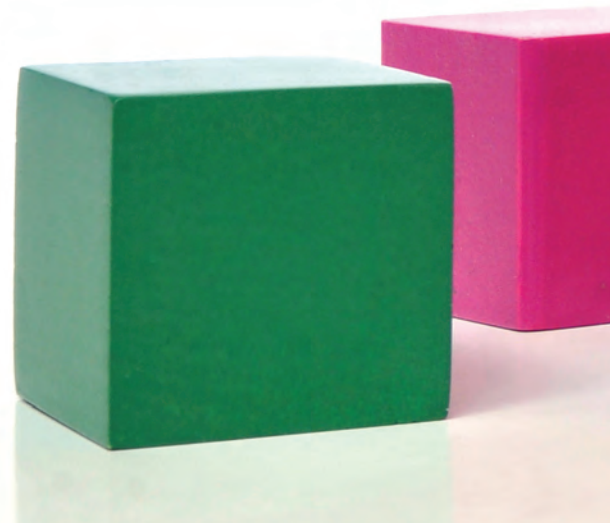
It’s no big revelation to say that the nationwide adoption of the Common Core standards has brought about a sea change in K-12 education. So far, according to the Common Core State Standards website, 45 states and three territories have adopted the standards, which were first launched in 2010, and implementation is taking different forms in each one.

As teachers grapple with what that implementation looks like, they are finding innovative solutions — such as LearnZillion and the Literacy Design Collaborative, among others — to help them advance their own effectiveness through professional learning and build better lessons.

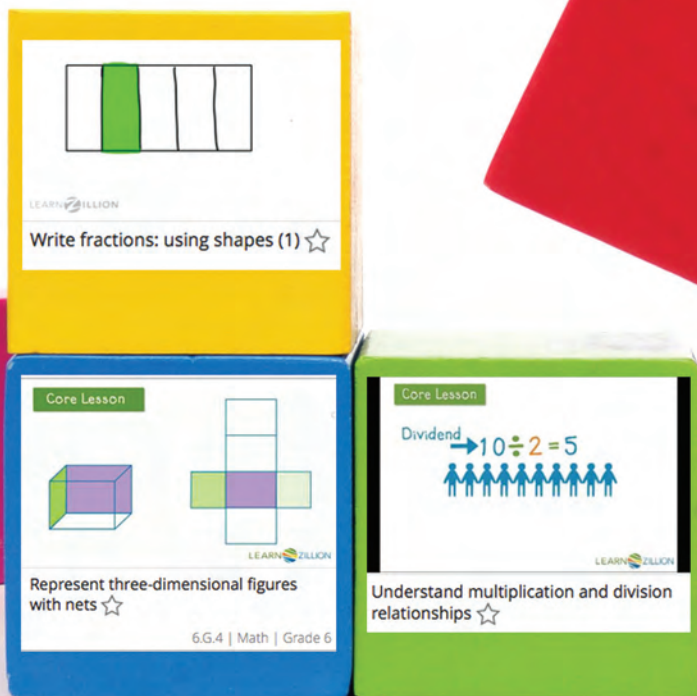
“States recognize that you can’t just all of a sudden start teaching the Common Core standards,” said Posie Wilkinson, academic coordinator at LearnZillion and former teacher. “The Common Core standards require very different things of our teachers. They require a deeper level of content knowledge, a different kind of instruction.”

## LEARNZILLION

LearnZillion’s website describes it as an innovative online learning platform that combines video segments, assessments,



Examples of Common Core lessons are on LearnZillion.com.



and progress reporting in lessons that correlate to Common Core standards, starting with math in grades 3-9. The project began at E.L. Haynes Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., as a way for teachers to share best practices across classrooms.

“These teachers, just working together, would briefly record a lesson they thought was great, share it with each other, show it to each other’s students, and then come back and discuss it,” Wilkinson said.

“All along, these lessons were getting better and better — a process we like to call ‘polishing the stone’ — because the teachers were able to spend their time together focused on discussing the content.”

E.L. Haynes Principal Eric Westendorf and Washington, D.C.-area educator Alix Guerrier decided to take this idea public as a way to help other teachers learn the new Common Core standards through the expertise of experienced teachers. In 2011, they launched LearnZillion with funding from the Next Generation Learning Challenge, NewSchools Venture Fund, Achievement Network, and others.

When the site first launched, it included 400 video lessons. Now, thanks to a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Founda-

tion, it has more than 2,000 lessons for K-8 math, high school math, and English language arts. These lessons were created by what LearnZillion calls a “Dream Team” of teacher leaders who hail from 29 of the 50 states. The site, free to all visitors, has more than 40,000 registered teacher users and includes a tool called Common Core Navigator, designed to help teachers zero in on what their students need to know at each grade level and in each subject.

A feature that Wilkinson especially loves is called Coach’s Commentary, in which the lesson creator speaks directly to the teacher who is viewing his or her content. “It’s essentially a conversation between colleagues, a chance to explain the choices they made,” she says. “So you can really get some entrée into the thinking and the content instructional decisions that went on behind this lesson.”

For Julie McGough, the LearnZillion approach to learning and building lessons made so much sense that she signed up to be one of last summer’s Dream Team members, contributing 20 of her own lessons to the growing database.

The process was both challenging and eye-opening. “Doing the first 10, it was like pulling teeth to figure it out,” she recalls with a laugh. “It was really hard to coordinate

the technology aspect of it, it was intimidating to record myself making the video, and then just unpacking the content was hard, too.”

She confesses that her slide presentations took an average of five to 10 hours to build and that her first few attempts are not nearly as impressive as her last few. But she says that the process of creating the lesson helped her to make sense of the content in a way she’d never done before — and in a way that really resonated with her students and fellow teachers.

“I did a lesson on LearnZillion on adding and subtracting decimals,” McGough says. “When I showed it to my students, I heard all over the classroom, ‘Oh, now I get it!’ Somehow, for them, seeing the material presented in this way and having the chance to replay it was really powerful.”

McGough says that educators across grade levels and disciplines can benefit immensely by engaging with the content on the site. And since the Common Core standards necessitate what is, for many teachers, a vastly different approach to content, having a wealth of examples of how other teachers structure lessons is invaluable.

“In California, Common Core is a really different way of structuring our learning, and, for many teachers, they’re going to have to relearn how to do it, because they content wasn’t taught this way when they were in school,” McGough says.

#### MORE FROM THE LEADING EDGE

**L**earnZillion and the **Literacy Design Collaborative** aren’t the only cool tools in the chest when it comes to innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Here are more places teachers can go for support, help with content, and the opportunity to collaborate with educators across the country.

- **BetterLesson.com** is an online community where educators can connect, create, organize, and share curricula. Founded by a group of teachers from Atlanta and Boston public schools, this free site focuses on aggregating and scaling innovative content and practices from high-performing teachers across the country.
- **The Khan Academy ([www.khanacademy.org](http://www.khanacademy.org))** is a not-for-profit site that hosts more than 3,600 videos on K-12 math and science topics, as well as some topics on finance and history. All materials on the site are free.
- **The Mathematics Design Collaborative ([www.groupgenius.org/mathematics](http://www.groupgenius.org/mathematics))** is the mathematics counterpart to the Literacy Design Collaborative.
- **Promethean Planet ([www.prometheanplanet.com/en-us](http://www.prometheanplanet.com/en-us))** provides lesson planning tips, strategies, content, and resources for a range of topics and grade levels. Membership is free.

#### BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION

Long-time educator and fellow Dream Team member Ginny Baldwin, an elementary math instructional coach for the Georgia Cyber Academy in Atlanta, shares those sentiments. Baldwin, who has 22 years of experience, admits that learning the Common Core has been a bit like learning a foreign language.

“The Common Core standards are new for everyone, so working with LearnZillion helped me focus on specific standards and learn them at a very in-depth level. Although many of the basic concepts for each grade level are the same, the approach to teaching and assessing student understanding is very different,” Baldwin wrote in an email. “The videos and Coach’s Commentary that are provided with the lessons provide a glimpse into what each standard means and how to translate abstract math concepts into conceptual activities that make sense to students. The resources provided help teachers just as much as they help students.”

Baldwin says teachers at Georgia Cyber Academy use the videos, lessons, and guided practice activities to build a strong foundational knowledge of each standard, and that they use the LearnZillion materials to plan their weekly instruction. They can also use the formative assessment data they gather to determine what skills students may need to work on to build up any weak areas.

And that, in a nutshell, is how Posie Wilkinson suggests users approach the LearnZillion content: “Decide on the standard you’re working on, dive into it, figure out what it means, then look at one of our lessons and see how one of our teachers implemented that standard,” she counsels.

“Then consider how you should teach this to your own students, where you’re seeing gaps and strengths in your student data, and what you might have done differently if you were the one creating this lesson for LearnZillion.”

McGough takes it one step further. “I expect that, when all of my colleagues are working from the Common Core, we’ll be able to sit down and plan instruction together, how to build understanding for our students.”

#### THE LITERACY DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

While McGough, Baldwin, and Wilkinson are getting the word out about LearnZillion, another cadre of educators is singing the praises of a second effort to bring teachers, curriculum experts, and other stakeholders together to create high-quality lessons and tools based on Common Core standards.

The Literacy Design Collaborative, also funded by the Gates Foundation, is basically a framework for developing reading, writing, and thinking skills within various academic disciplines. The framework embeds Common Core literacy standards into content-area instruction and provides templates, strategies, and tasks for designing units that engage students in thoughtful investigations of their discipline.

It's a wonderful, brilliant, robust tool, users say. It's also complicated, challenging, and — at least at first — a little frustrating

Mary Lynn Huie, a literacy trainer with the Georgia Department of Education, helps teachers across the state learn how to use the framework. She's one of its biggest fans, but clear-eyed about its rigors

"It's not the only way to deliver the Common Core literacy standards, but it has a huge advantage over other methods in that it's a framework that works for teachers who don't have much of an idea what literacy's about," Huie says.

"It's very organized, and it gives people templates to use that can at first seem a little rigid. I have to admit now that, when I use a template and make myself work through it, really make my lesson fit it, I actually have a better, more focused unit."

The Literacy Design Collaborative framework is built around templates that assign tasks based on Common Core literacy standards. Each template is a fill-in-the-blank form teachers use to design their own teaching by selecting content standards to address, texts students will read, and issues they will discuss in their writing.

"We want teachers to understand the concept of writing to learn, that writing is a way to understand your own thinking, and reading is a way to understand the thinking of another person," Huie says. "When you tell science teachers and social science teachers that what we're asking them to do is teach the reading and writing of their discipline, not the fixing of commas, then they start to understand."

### GET STUDENTS INVESTED IN CONTENT

Susan Weston, an education consultant for the state of Kentucky and a member of the collaborative's design team, suggests that another potential hurdle for teachers is the fact that the modules are designed to cover two to four weeks of instruction, which is a big chunk of time in a school year. The key, she says, is to provide an engaging task or prompt that students can then delve into, using a set of reading and writing activities based on research articles chosen by the teacher.

"When you're choosing the reading, you really have to be in the content to produce good tasks. You have to know your stuff and have confidence in your content knowledge to turn the students loose with these research articles," Weston says.

"At first, teachers worry their students aren't actually learning the content. But we're finding that students are investing really deeply in the content and that teachers feel empowered with their expertise. It takes a little extra work at the beginning, but it starts to make more sense as you go. It's a very exciting process, taking teachers who are good at what they do and giving them something they can use to be even better at it."

For Katie Bryant, that process has changed the way she thinks about teaching and how she prepares her lessons. It has

### RESOURCES TO GO

The LearnZillion website (<http://learnzillion.com>) is the hub for educational content, but there's also a blog where additional video clips and resources are uploaded frequently, along with posts by LearnZillion co-founder Eric Westendorf and links to webinars and media coverage (check out the story about Bill Gates at <http://tinyurl.com/cf53v7q>). And there's the option to follow LearnZillion on Twitter (<http://twitter.com/LearnZillion>) and Facebook ([www.facebook.com/LearnZillion](http://www.facebook.com/LearnZillion)).

Similarly, the Literacy Design Collaborative website ([www.literacydesigncollaborative.org](http://www.literacydesigncollaborative.org)) is the host for templates and fully fleshed out sample modules as well as the collaborative's Guidebook 1.0, which explains the how and why of the framework.

Additional resources include the Think Tank, a social learning network where Literacy Design Collaborative participants can connect, collaborate, reflect, and improve their practice. To watch a video of Susan Weston discussing the collaborative, see <http://vimeo.com/27219167>.

definitely changed the way she thinks about writing and how that can be a tool to both solidify knowledge and reveal gaps in that knowledge.

In her classroom, the use of writing and reading has led to deeper understanding and broader horizons.

To find out where her students were weak in their content knowledge, she reviewed data from state tests and discovered that the area of energy and transformation was a topic with which students historically struggled. So she generated writing topics that would help reinforce that content and came up with the following prompt: "How does photosynthesis demonstrate the law of the conservation of matter and the law of the conservation of energy?"

The students weren't the only ones who needed a bit of a refresher. "I had to review photosynthesis myself, because it's been a long time since I've taught biology," Bryant confesses.

At the end of the module, Bryant had a hundred different student papers dealing with photosynthesis, with a variety of perspectives. "Some of the students talked about how photosynthesis is a kind of recycling of energy and matter," she says. "The way they presented things made me look at them differently."

The process also changes the way the students look at things. "They tend to think of things discretely instead of thinking of them as one continuum in science," she says. "So this brings in concepts and ties them all together so they can see the relationship between all different subjects."

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