

Speaking Back to the Common Core

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The Common Core initiative is a triumph of branding. The standards are portrayed as so consensual, so universally endorsed, so thoroughly researched and vetted, so self-evidently necessary to economic progress, so broadly representative of beliefs in the educational community—that they cease to be even debatable. They are held in *common*; they penetrate to the *core* of our educational aspirations, uniting even those who might usually disagree. We can be freed from noisy disagreement, and should get on with the work of reform.

This deft rollout may account for the absence of vigorous debate about the Common Core State Standards. If they represent a common core—a center—critics are by definition on the fringe or margins, whiners and complainers obstructing progress. And given the fact that states have already adopted them—*before* they were completely formulated—what is the point in opposition? We should get on with the task of implementation, and, of course, alignment.

But as the great rhetorician Kenneth Burke continually reminds us, all arguments are from a debatable perspective—there is no all-encompassing position, no argument from everywhere. The arguments that hide their controversial edges, their perspective, are the most suspect. “When in Rome act as the Greeks” (1931/1968, 119), he advises us. So in that spirit I would like to raise a series of concerns.

1. *Conflict of interest*. It is a fundamental principle of governance that those who establish the guidelines do not benefit financially from those guidelines. We don’t, for example, let representatives of pharmaceutical companies set health guidelines, for fairly obvious reasons. But in the case of the CCSS, the two major college testing agencies, the College Board and ACT, were engaged to write the standards, when it was obvious that they would create products (or had created products) to test them. The College Board, for example, almost immediately claimed that “The SAT demonstrates strong agreement to the Common Core Writing Standards and there is very strong agreement between the skills required on the SAT essay and the Common Core State Standards” (Vasavada et al. 2011, 5). In fact, the College Board claims that there is also a

strong alignment between other products, the PSAT/NMSQT and Redistep, which starts in eighth grade. Clearly, there is a conflict of interest here.

2. *Misdiagnosis of the problem.* A central premise of the CCSS is that students are not reading difficult enough texts and that we need to ramp up the complexity of the texts they encounter. I would argue that the more serious problem is that students cease to read voluntarily, generally around middle school—and fail to develop the stamina for difficult texts (Newkirk 2008). Once they get to high school, they are “overmatched” by standard books like *Lord of the Flies* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Smith and Wilhelm 2002)—and they resort to SparkNotes and other strategies that allow them to avoid reading the books. This evasion is epidemic in our schools. Increasing the complexity of what they read—and requiring books like *Grapes of Wrath* in ninth or tenth grade, as recommended by the CCSS—will only exacerbate the problem. In order to develop fluency and real reading power (that will enable students to tackle the classics), students need abundant practice with engaging contemporary writing that does not pose a constant challenge (or maybe a range of challenges) to them. The reading workshop models of Penny Kittle and Nancie Atwell provide a much more plausible road map for creating readers who can handle difficulty.
3. *Developmental inappropriateness.* It is clear now that the designers of the CCSS took a top-down approach, beginning with expectations for eleventh and twelfth graders and then working down to the earlier grades. The process, it seems to me, is one of downshifting; early college expectations (at least what I do in my college classes) are downshifted to eleventh or twelfth grade, and the process continues right into kindergarten. The target student texts in Appendix C are clearly those of exceptional, even precocious students; in fact, the CCSS has taken what I see as exceptional work, that of perhaps the top 5 percent of students, and made it the new norm. What had once been an expectation for fourth graders becomes the standard for second graders as in this example:

Write informative/explanatory texts in which they [i.e., second graders] introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points and provide a concluding statement.

Normally this would be the expectation of an upper-elementary report; now it is the requirement for seven-year-olds.

It might be argued that high standards, even if they are beyond the reach of many students, will still be useful in raising performance. But if legitimately tested, these standards will result in a substantial proportion, in many schools a majority, of students failing to meet them—thus feeding the narrative of school failure (already the case in Kentucky). Given the experience with the unrealism of the No Child Left Behind demand for 100 percent proficiency, it seems to me unwise to move to a new set of unrealistic expectations.

4. *A sterile view of reading.* Another serious issue is the view of reading that underlies the standards. This view is spelled out by two authors of the English/Language Arts standards, David Coleman (now President of the College Board) and Susan Pimentel (2011) in a set of guidelines that are designed to help publishers align their material. It is a revealing and consequential document that helps us move beyond generalities to the way standards are to be taught (and most likely tested).

Much of what Coleman and Pimentel say is appealing. I like the focus on thoughtful reading—and rereading. I agree that discussions can move away from the text too often (I can think of many examples from my own classes). I like the idea of helping students engage with challenging texts. And I like that they urge publishers to refrain from making pages so busy with distracting marginalia that they come to resemble *People* magazine.

The central message in their guidelines is that the focus should be on “the text itself”—echoing the injunctions of New Criticism during the early and mid-1900s. The text should be understood in “its own terms.” While the personal connections and judgments of the readers may enter in later, they should do so only after students demonstrate “a clear understanding of what they read.” So the model of reading seems to have two stages—first a close reading in which the reader withholds judgment or comparison with other texts, focusing solely on what is happening within “the four corners of the text.” And only then are prior knowledge, personal association, and appraisal allowed in.

This seems to me an inhuman, even impossible, and certainly unwise prescription. Test it out yourself on the opening to Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*:

Found Objects

It began the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel. Sasha was adjusting her yellow eye shadow in the mirror when she noticed a bag on the floor beside the sink that must have belonged to the woman whose peeing she could faintly hear through the vaultlike door of the toilet stall. Inside the rim of the bag, barely visible, was a wallet made of pale green leather. It was easy for Sasha to recognize, looking back, that the peeing woman’s blind trust had provoked her. *We live in a city where people will steal the hair off your head if you give them half a chance, but you leave your stuff lying in plain sight and expect it to be waiting for you when you come back.* It made her want to teach the woman a lesson. (2011, 3)

My own reading focus was on Sasha’s thought process, how she is beginning to rationalize the taking of this woman’s wallet. But when I shared this opening with female readers, many of them picked up the detail of the yellow eye shadow, something I had totally ignored. What kind of woman wears yellow eye shadow? What do you say about yourself when you wear it? Combined with the fact that Sasha seems familiar with bathrooms in swank hotels, some speculated that she was a prostitute (not a bad guess as it turns out). But these readers were hardly staying in the four corners of the text; they were using their knowledge of makeup and the message it sends. It’s what readers do.

To get down to practicalities, there is bound to be great confusion about what a “text-dependent question” is. Must that question stay within the “four corners of the text” and not draw on prior experience or knowledge? Purely literal questions can be confined in this way, but any inference or judgment rests on some information not in the text (as in the case of the eye shadow). Even language itself evokes a world beyond the text. As two Stanford psychologists put it: “The bare text is something like a play script that the reader uses like a theatre director to construct in imagination a full stage production” (Bower and Morrow 1990, 44). We can never stay within the four corners of the text—even if we tried.

5. *Underplaying role of narrative.* The CCSS present us with a “map” of writing types that is fundamentally flawed—because it treats “narrative” as a *type* of discourse, distinguished from “informational” and “argumentative” writing. In doing so (and the CCSS are not alone in this), they fail to acknowledge the central role narrative plays in all writing, indeed in human understanding. Mark Turner, a cognitive psychologist and literary critic, puts the claim this way: “Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend on it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, of explaining” (1996, 4–5).

Biology, for example, is all about process, about action, about events occurring in time, in sequence. Photosynthesis is a story; our immune system is a story; digestion is a story—even “corn sex” is a story, told well by Elizabeth Kolbert in a *New Yorker* piece:

Corn sex is complicated. . . . [T]he whole affair is so freakishly difficult it’s hard to imagine how it evolved in the first place. Corn’s female organs are sheathed in a sort of vegetable chastity belt—surrounded by a tough, virtually impenetrable husk. The only way in is by means of a silk thread that each flower extends, Rapunzel-like, through a small opening. For fertilization to take place, a grain of pollen must land on the tip of the silk, then shimmy its way six to eight inches through a microscopic tube, a journey that requires several hours. The result of a successful passage is a single kernel. When everything is going well, the process is repeated something like eight hundred times per ear, or roughly eighty thousand times per bushel. (2012, 19)

We may not want to think of these 800 sexual acts when we eat an ear of corn, but I suspect that we will remember this sequence—because it is told in story form.

In his groundbreaking book *Vernacular Eloquence*, Peter Elbow explains our need for a structure that “binds time” that creates a sense of movement and connectivity:

Good writers—consciously or not—tend to remember that readers have an experience that is more temporal than spatial. So where do writers find the energy that binds written words together so as to pull readers along from one part to the next and make them experience the text as a coherent whole? Since reading is a series of events in time, my claim is the same one that applies to music. Successful writers lead us on a journey to satisfaction by way of expectations, frustrations, half satisfactions, temporary satisfactions: a well-planned sequence of yearnings and reliefs, itches and scratches. (2012, 303)

Narrative, he claims, is a universal pattern of language that creates sequences of expectation and satisfaction; it binds time, creates a congenial pattern of cognitive movement.

6. *A reform that gives extraordinary power to standardized tests.* The Common Core State Standards are joined at the hip to standardized tests, not surprising because both the College Board and the ACT has such a big role in their creation. It was clear from their conception that they would play a large part in teacher evaluation, a requirement for applications for Race to the Top funds and exemptions from No Child Left Behind. A number of literacy educators have chosen to cherry-pick—endorse the standards but not the tests; yet they are clearly a package. The Department of Education has committed 300 million dollars to the creation of these new tests, which are now being designed by two consortia, PARCC and Smarter Balanced. These tests will give operational reality to the standards—in effect they will become the standards; there will be little incentive to teach to skills that are not tested (this is a lesson from No Child Left Behind). We are all waiting for this other shoe to drop. In addition, there will be heavy pressure to adopt interim tests, like the Star assessments, that monitor progress toward CCSS.

The central question is this: Are standardized tests compatible with the more complex goals of twenty-first-century literacy? Or are they a regressive and reductive technology (ironically, many of the countries we are chasing in international comparisons do not share our belief in these tests)?

It all comes down to the parable of the drunk and his keys, an old joke that goes like this: A drunk is fumbling along under a streetlight when a policeman comes up and asks him what he is doing. The drunk explains he is looking for his keys. “Do you think you lost them there?” the policeman asks.

“No. But the light is better here.”

We have here a parable of standardized assessment. There is the learning we hope to evaluate (the keys) and the instruments we have to assess that learning (the streetlight). The central question of assessment is whether our instruments help us see what we should be looking for—or are we like the drunk, simply looking where the light is better? Let’s take, for example, a literacy task that would be on anyone’s list as necessary for being college or career-ready: the ability to make a persuasive presentation of researched material, combining oral and digital components, and then answering questions from an audience. I suspect this will *not* be on any standardized test—and not because it is unimportant. It is simply too expensive, too unpredictable, too time-consuming, too individual for a mass testing situation. It would be a nightmare to standardize (and pay) all the panels that would be needed to make an assessment. It doesn’t fit under the streetlight.

Standardized tests are ill-suited to evaluate expressive abilities, speaking, and writing (and creativity in general). Though there are standards for speaking in the CCSS, they are unlikely to be tested in any serious or complex way. Yet speaking and strong interpersonal skills are especially necessary in the expanding health care field and on most other growth fields in our postindustrial economy.

7. *A bonanza for commercialism.* One can imagine the relief felt by the makers of educational products when the diversity of state standards were consolidated by the Common Core Initiative. Anyone who has been to an educational conference recently, or perused the new wrapper for *Education Week*, will be inundated with promises of alignment—one advertises that its product is “100% pure Common Core” (October 17, 2012). They promise to take over the heavy lifting of adjusting to the new standards: reading passages will be at the proper “Lexile” level; questions will be appropriately “text based” and aligned to standards; the proportion of nonfiction texts will match the guidelines—no need to seek them out. It will take a sturdy administrator to insist that teachers themselves can do this work.

We are already seeing at work a process I call “mystification”—taking a practice that was once viewed as within the normal competence of a teacher and making it seem so technical and advanced that a new commercial product (or form of consultation) is necessary. Take the problem of text complexity, which has always been an issue for reading instruction in this country going back at least to the *New England Primer* that had progressively more difficult texts. Librarians and teachers have long reviewed texts to see if the language, familiarity with the topic, and length would pose difficulty for readers. In some elementary schools children were taught the very useful five-finger rule—more than five unknown words on a page and the book was too hard. So long as teachers and librarians are familiar with the books available, it wasn’t a big deal.

But it is now.

Pearson, for example, is marketing a Reading Maturity Metric that is supposedly 30 percent more accurate than current readability formulas. It is derived from “intensive computer analyses to identify more fundamental text features that contribute to text complexity”—which sounds very impressive. Or educators can go to the MetaMetrics to learn how to create Lexile scores for their students: “A book, article, or piece of text gets a Lexile text measure when it’s analyzed by MetaMetrics.” For example, “the first ‘Harry Potter’ book measures 880L, so it’s called an 880 Lexile book.” All of this sounds impressive, scientific, and beyond the skill range of teachers. (And what a miracle that millions of young readers found their way to

Harry Potter without this technology.) But is determining text difficulty really that baffling a process? It is the function of mystification to convince us that it is.

8. *Standards directing instruction.* The creators of the CCSS were clearly aware of the delicate political situation they were working in—specifically finessing the opposition to any form of national curriculum. That is why they are called “state” standards when they are clearly intended as national standards (another nice branding touch). They are *replacing* diverse state standards. Another way in which they walk a fine line is the claim that they are not dictating curriculum or teaching methods; promoters claim these decisions should be made at the local level, by teachers and curriculum directors. The mantra is that the standards indicate where students are going but not how they are to get there.

But can this line hold?

Can goals be so clearly distinguished from methods? It would seem that this line has already been breached by the writers of the standards, Coleman and Pimentel in particular, when they prescribe percentage of “text dependent” questions that should appear in basal readers. Or when they dictate the proper proportion of nonfiction to fiction texts that should be taught. Although the CCSS don’t dictate particular texts (though they suggest them), these “guidelines” are clearly curricular decisions, pedagogical decisions; they deal with means as well as the goals. As the standards become operational in standardized tests, this line will be even fuzzier; testing strategies will be transformed into classroom tasks. I realize that this may not bother some, who would argue that if the tests are innovative it will be useful to teach toward them. But the claims of pedagogical freedom obscure the invasive role the standards are already playing.

9. *Drowning out other conversations.* In economic theory there is the concept of “opportunity cost”—in any choice, the consumer is foregoing other choices, other opportunities that cannot be pursued. In schools, if all of the discussion is about A, we pay an opportunity cost of not discussing B, C, D, and other topics. With No Child Left Behind, curriculum discussions focused on numerical data and test scores. There was then an opportunity cost of not talking about specific children. I attended a recent district meeting in which a curriculum director was asked, “Are you taking any initiatives that are not related to the Common Core?” The answer was essentially “no.”

The principle of opportunity costs prompts us to ask: “What conversations won’t we be having?” Since the CCSS virtually ignore poetry, will we cease to speak about it? What about character education, service learning? What about fiction writing in the upper high school grades? What about the arts that are not amenable to standardized testing? What about collaborative learning, an obvious twenty-first-century skill? We lose opportunities when we cease to discuss these issues and allow the CCSS to completely set the agenda, when the only map is the one it creates.

Now it may be that I am wrong. I’ve been wrong before (never thought bottled water would catch on). I have colleagues I respect who think so. It may be that the CCSS does what others claim they will—encourage good pedagogical discussion, clarify goals, help students read deeply, give writing its proper place in the curriculum, expand the repertoire in English Language Arts to a focus on quality nonfiction. And that the initiative won’t dissolve into teaching to the new tests. Let’s hope so.

But I’m left with the question: Who watches the watcher? Who assesses the assessor? That’s our job. We’ve come too far, learned too much, invented too much to diminish our practice by one iota to accommodate the Common Core. When and if we see it impeding our best work, it is not too late to speak up.

In a democracy it is *never* too late to speak back, to question, to criticize. As Martin Luther King Jr. argued in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” it is never “untimely.” We simply cannot give up our democratic birthright and settle into compliance, not on something this important. We need to pierce the aura of inevitability that promoters have woven around the Common Core. We have to “follow the money” and ask who benefits financially from this initiative (especially important considering the financial scandals that occurred with Reading First several years ago). We need to ask about the role of unaccountable think tanks, testing agencies, and foundations in driving this initiative—have we outsourced reform? We have to determine what value to place on local control and teacher decision making. We have to ask about the usefulness of the “data” that tests provide and whether these data may be crowding out the richer, contextual observations of teachers. And we have to look at the limitations of tests themselves, what they can illuminate and what they must ignore. Can they test the complex, integrated, and creative skills that students will truly need—not only to be better workers but more fully realized human beings?

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