Rewriting the Common Core State Standards for Tomorrow’s Literacies

That is IMPOSSIBLE in my classroom.” The phrase, often said with dismay and defeat, is common among literacy teachers working to make sense of decades of educational reforms that privilege standardization and uniformity. In recent years, descriptions of a narrowed curriculum, instructional decisions that are all but erased, and the proliferation of standardized testing have been common, and we hear similar complaints in relation to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). We hear stories, for example, of principals who require teachers to privilege informational texts over narrative, grade-level chairs who insist they can no longer teach poetry, and school districts that demand teachers use the “exemplar” text sets they purchased—all because the “CCSS said so.” Those same teachers are inundated with a mass of products, curricula, and guides for implementing the CCSS as well as idea after idea pinned as CCSS-ready on social media sites such as Pinterest. In short, teachers today are knee-deep in hearsay about what is and is not possible in literacy classrooms according to the CCSS.

Like the teachers we work with, we take to heart calls to read between the lines of the CCSS; that is, rather than take at face value the interpretations of others that can undercut the supposedly broad, inclusive goals of the CCSS, we do close observational readings of what “exists in the document and what the standards are asking of students” (Wessling, Lillge, and VanKooten 15). We remind ourselves that the CCSS are not a curriculum and, in fact, the text of the standards emphasizes the importance of “professional judgment, experience, and knowledge of their students and the subject” (“Appendix A-ELA” 4). We read, with our pre-service students, what the CCSS actually state—that “[t]he Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (Introduction 6) and that the exemplar texts “do not represent a partial or complete reading list” (“Appendix B-ELA” 2).

Yet, we struggle. We struggle with how to encourage teachers to rely on their own judgment and select books based on a variety of factors (e.g., knowledge of each child, community values, curricular goals) when our instructions about the CCSS are just one of many voices offering a way to make sense of the standards. Further, we struggle with how to guide them to use their new knowledge of the CCSS when they are faced with more powerful others (e.g., administrators, mentors, cooperating teachers) who may have read and understood the CCSS differently. In other words, although we believe that teachers must take responsibility for debunking common myths and correcting inaccurate or narrow readings of the CCSS, we worry that focusing on getting to the bottom of what the CCSS document says limits teachers’ options for action.

We find, for example, that teachers with whom we work are able to imagine new teaching possibilities after reading the CCSS closely, but often, once in the classroom, they rely on age-old advice to close the door and keep their mouths shut rather than speaking up about those possibilities. Instead of accepting this hidden work as the norm of literacy teaching—a result of years of teachers...
working within and against reform movements that strip them of their autonomy—we seek ways to make visible the creative and innovative practices teachers can enact in light of the CCSS. That is, we want to emphasize that the standards movement is not just a narrative thrust upon educators from above but also is a narrative that can and must be rewritten each day in our classrooms.

In this article, we highlight our ongoing efforts to position the CCSS as a living document that can be read again and again with an eye toward all sorts of literacy teaching and learning in classrooms. In other words, we explore how we, as teachers, can begin to think and speak of ourselves as authors of the CCSS and thus become participants in writing its history. We believe, like Foucault, that important change happens on the surface of things, in our daily conversations about the standards in which we imagine our work in relation to them. This means that teachers can find spaces of freedom by shifting conversations toward a “permanent questioning” (Rajchman 2) about what the CCSS can mean if read in a certain way. Below, we share how poststructural theories allow us to ask different questions of the CCSS instead of simply resisting interpretations. We offer examples of how those questions can be put to work in conversations about the CCSS.

**Asking Different Questions of the CCSS**

As described above, we believe it is essential for all stakeholders in education to read the CCSS closely to debunk persistent myths and to highlight that the CCSS are not intended to undermine “the crucial decisions about student learning” (Wessling, Lillge, and VanKooten 13) made within schools, classrooms, and communities. We also understand that demystifying the CCSS involves a recognition that “different people can read the same text in different ways” (Lankshear and Knobel 6). Beth Maloch and Randy Bomer, for instance, acknowledge the difficulty in defining what informational text means in the CCSS because “[t]hese categories are not fixed or agreed-upon, even among people who have each spent years researching them” (210). However, we recognize the practical difficulties that can prevent teachers from directly contradicting interpretations of the CCSS offered by others. Our preservice students often tell us that they do not feel comfortable telling cooperating teachers or administrators that they disagree with an interpretation of the standards because it can quickly turn into a dangerous he said/she said situation.

Recently, we have found promise in using poststructural theories to shift the focus away from locating the meaning of the CCSS toward an examination of how that text can be read and understood in a specific historical, cultural, and political moment. We explore how language is not merely a vehicle for transmitting ideas since, as French philosopher Jacques Derrida claims, words can be read as “more, less, or something other than what [we] would mean” (158). That is, words are overwritten by context and history as well as a variety of unimagined meanings yet to come. Documents like the CCSS, then, are sites of multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings that cannot be resolved even with a closer reading.

When we understand language as partial, never neutral, and contextually dependent, we can ask alternative questions that invite collaborative explorations of the CCSS rather than questions that incite disagreements over its meaning. When we understand language as partial, never neutral, and contextually dependent, we can ask alternative questions that invite collaborative explorations of the CCSS rather than questions that incite disagreements over its meaning. In their article, “Poststructuralism in English Classrooms: Critical Literacy and After,” Bronwyn Mello and Annette Patterson suggest that questions like, “What does this text mean? or What does this text mean to you?” (91) can be replaced or complemented with questions such as, “What are possible readings of this text? Where could such different readings ‘come from’? How might such different readings be constructed? What values might such readings support or affirm, or oppose?” (91). Changing the questions, they argue, enables new ways of reading texts because those new questions highlight how different interpretations produce the text as meaningful in different ways at different times. In other words, when we question what readings of the CCSS are possible, we invite ourselves to think and speak about the CCSS in ways that recognize the document is not finished. We must return to read it differently, remaining open to
those meanings we have not imagined yet. We suggest that having conversations guided by the question, “What if we read the CCSS as . . .?” allows the CCSS to remain relevant to any cultural, historical, or technological moment in which it is put to work. Ten years ago, it was unthinkable, for example, that a finger swipe would turn the page of a book or that a teacher’s request to get out a writing implement could be met with students retrieving a stylus. Or, as we describe below, in the late 16th century, Shakespeare may just have been a playwright for a local audience, but to a ninth-grade student today, the word Shakespeare may conjure photos posted by Instagram users marked with #Shakespeare. Even those simple examples demonstrate the importance of reading the CCSS differently in different contexts. To ignore potential readings renders the CCSS irrelevant over time. The shift from seeking the truth to continuously producing truth in conjunction with others, then, invites constant reimagining of the CCSS. It is, after all, more difficult to dismiss people, regardless of their place in the institutional hierarchy, who invite you to imagine with them what might be possible in literacy classrooms.

In the next section, we put the question “What if we read the CCSS as . . .?” to work in relation to the grades 6–12 Reading Standards for Literature and Informational Texts. Specifically, we highlight possibilities that can be opened up for the important and timely task of preparing students for 21st-century literacies. It is our hope that modeling this kind of questioning will prompt other educators to invite additional interpretations of the CCSS.

#Shakespeare

There is a common argument against the CCSS that they reinforce traditional conceptions of the canon, that is, “a small circle of works chosen by a close-knit group of people who seek to define and preserve their notion of cultural thinking” (Perry and Stallworth 13). Stergios Botzakis, Leslie Burns, and Leigh Hall, for example, note that the list of 38 texts used to demonstrate text complexity in grades 6–12 includes only one text from the 21st century, and almost half were written between the 16th and 19th centuries. Literacy educators are concerned, and rightly so, that current authors, young adult literature, and texts that do not reflect the dominant culture can become obsolete, or that “students’ out of school experiences” (Alvermann) will not be honored with a narrow focus on texts. Although we recognize that it is important to debunk the myth that the CCSS actually mandate a list of texts to be adopted and taught, the CCSS document, like all texts, is not neutral.

When reading the CCSS ELA Standards for grades 9–12, for example, it is striking that knowledge of Shakespeare is deemed important for preparing students for college and career readiness. Although one standard provides W. H. Auden’s “Musee des Beaux Arts” as an example of a text that can be compared with a fine art painting, no other author is explicitly mentioned in the 9–12 standards except Shakespeare. Shakespeare, in fact, is mentioned in three different standards, two of which cite his work as the mandated source that students must use as they engage in a variety of literacy tasks. The following standard, for instance,
states that eleventh and twelfth graders should be able to “[a]nalyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)” (ELA CCSS for Knowledge and Integration of Ideas 38). Here, Shakespeare is the only source text explicitly mentioned, and it is difficult not to read the standards as dictating what should be valued in a literacy classroom.

It makes sense, for example, that a district might buy class sets of Shakespeare’s plays and have them available for teachers’ use, stating that “the CCSS say” Shakespeare is a must. A teacher might then be asked to teach multiple interpretations of the chosen Shakespeare play by reading the purchased text and perhaps watching or listening to a production of that same play. The teacher may not agree with the selection provided by the district and may rightfully argue that she should be provided latitude in selecting both the play and the comparison interpretation. She might argue that the CCSS say that Shakespeare matters, but they do not say which Shakespeare play matters most—a difficult position for a novice or preservice teacher with limited models of how to advocate for an interpretation.

If, however, instead of asking, “What does the CCSS say?” we ask, “What if we read it as . . . ?,” we begin to open up spaces for teachers to advocate for their interpretations. #Shakespeare, as mentioned above, can be read as more than just the name of an author; it can be read as a network of ideas and images that circulate because others have tagged the term in relation to either the playwright, his play, or even an experience that felt Shakespearean. What if we allowed this type of tagging, so to speak, to happen in other ways as well? What if a mention of Shakespeare’s play took us to Twitterature (Aciman and Rensin), a text in which The Tempest is written as a series of tweets, or to Forbidden Planet, a film that recasts The Tempest in space? Further, what if we read the term Shakespeare and thought of Manga Shakespeare’s graphic novel interpretation (in digital application or hard copy) of The Tempest (Duffield), or a fan-fiction story (beautiful-cas) inspired by Shakespeare’s The Tempest that replaces the Shakespearean characters with characters from the BBC’s most recent reboot of the Sherlock Holmes narrative? What if we recalled a Shakesperience using one of Sourcebooks’ electronic, fully interactive texts, which include photos, an at-your-fingertips glossary, and “video clips of selected scenes . . . allowing the reader to see the written words in action” (Biersdorfer)?

Although it can be argued that the authors of the CCSS did not have those kinds of examples in mind when they suggested plays by Shakespeare, for many readers, Shakespeare has come to mean more, less, and something other than simply the author. In other words, the term Shakespeare has been over-written by culture, history, and technology. Like a palimpsest, a document on which the original text has been obscured or erased by other texts while still holding traces of the original, Shakespeare has been remixed and can be read not only as the name of an author but also as a network of texts. This network makes Shakespeare understandable as a site of multiple and conflicting interpretations. A reader cannot, for example, return to the text of a Shakespeare play without perhaps having all of the images marked with #Shakespeare informing that reading.

If we read Shakespeare as a network, then we can recognize that although we must use Shakespeare, we can explore possibilities of what is meant by that requirement. This new reading enables new opportunities to prepare students for 21st-century literacies that have yet to come. Imagine planning a unit in which Shakespeare is seen as a layered network in all of the ways mentioned above. It quickly becomes impossible to tease out the original Shakespeare text, but that is exactly what may be necessary to help students maneuver “the ethical responsibilities required” by the “complex environments” of 21st-century literacies (“The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies”). Literacy teachers can ask questions with their students such as, How do we determine where one text ends and the other begins? or Who has ownership and responsibility for those texts? The fact that a school district has purchased just one Shakespeare play, then, becomes less problematic if we join our students in exploring how Shakespeare circulates in the multiple environments in which we work and live. The result is that we, with our students, rewrite the canon according to our historical, cultural, and technological moment every time we study Shakespeare.
Text And . . .

Literacy educators largely agree that with shifts in technology and culture, literacy practices must also shift, thus affecting how and what we teach students. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, for example, describe digital literacies as “ shorthand for the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc. via digital codification” (5). Those texts include “blogs, video games, text messages, online social network pages, discussion forums, internet memes, FAQs, online search results, and so on” (5). Many educators argue that the CCSS are supportive of the multiple literacies necessary for 21st-century reading. Tonya Perry and Rebecca Manery, for example, describe a teacher who finds freedom in the Anchor Standard for Writing that emphasizes technology because it allows him to work with students to evaluate multimedia texts, analyze multiple streams of media, and engage with other 21st-century literacies. Sarah Wessling, Danielle Lillge, and Crystal VanKooten read CCSS descriptions of text complexity as invitations for teachers to use context texts and texture texts, which may include blogs, graphic novels, films or film excerpts, young adult literature, podcasts, and so forth. By focusing on what the CCSS say, then, it is easy to see how the standards can be read as inclusive because they present the idea that there are a variety of complex texts that can and should be mastered.

However, we have also found it difficult to think inclusively while reading the CCSS document. We are struck by how easy it is to read the standards as privileging print-based texts as the favored form while digital texts are described as acceptable electronic versions of print-based texts or discounted as less valuable. For example, Appendix A states that “if students cannot read complex expository text to gain information, they will likely turn to text-free or text-light sources, such as video, podcasts, and tweets” because they maintain that those sources “cannot capture the nuance, subtlety, depth, or breadth of ideas developed through complex text” (4). Here, it is clear that video, podcasts, and tweets are something other than the type of complex expository text valued in the CCSS.

The CCSS make other moves to separate and hierarchize texts as well. According to the Reading Standards for Informational Texts, eighth-grade students, for instance, are expected to “[e]valuate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea” (ELA CCSS for Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 39). Although text is referenced 13 times across the other nine standards of that strand, only the above standard clarifies text with a list of examples. That move reinforces digital text, video, and multimedia as something other than the text referenced in the rest of the strand. Although we know that text can indicate a variety of forms and formats and that the CCSS advocate the use of multiple texts, it is hard to read text as anything other than print-based.

However, if we ask a different question of the CCSS (e.g., What if we read text as print-based text and digital text and multimedia text and video and podcast and and and?), it can become an invitation to colleagues in a grade-level meeting, for example, to join us in discussion about how we might make space for texts our students are currently reading that we may not know about or texts our students might read in the future that we cannot yet anticipate. Including a list of ands every time we encounter the word text in the CCSS renders the standards unfinished and allows them to remain relevant regardless of the historical moment. Questions like this help us create “[a]ctive, successful participants in this 21st century global society” who “[m]anage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information” (“NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies”).

Reading the CCSS with text and in mind, for example, opens possibilities for using technology and digital environments. Asking eighth-grade students to “determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text” (ELA CCSS for Craft and Structure 39) can focus on more than the intentions and purposes of one or two authors to involve a network of users. Sydney Dobrin, J. A. Rice, and Michael Vastola describe how moving away from linear, print-based models to technologies that encourage interaction among multiple and anonymous users (e.g., Pinterest, Instagram) does not “relegate knowledge and writing practices to a particular method, group formation, or environment. Rather, these sites reorganize, remix, and mash up information as a temporary instance in an indeterminable context” (9). A bookmarking
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History in Progress

The CCSS represent one entry in a long line of entries in the recent history of the standards movement in the United States. However, we believe that changing conversations about the CCSS away from battles between the right and wrong way to read them and toward questions of what possible readings we might enact, presents an opportunity to shift how the history of the CCSS progresses from here. Thinking the CCSS as a living document suggests a different kind of accountability to history—an ongoing accountability—because it is necessary to continuously return to the CCSS to interpret and reinterpret them and to decide how to put those interpretations to work in the classroom. We are not off the hook after having done a close reading of the CCSS because what the CCSS mean is being produced in how we use them today, tomorrow, and in an often unimaginable future.

Note

1. NCTE published a series of books titled Supporting Students in a Time of Core Standards available for grades K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12. According to the series editor, Anne Ruggles Gere, these texts are intended to help teachers address the CCSS while adhering to “principles of good teaching articulated by NCTE” (e.g., Perry and Manery). We find these books highly useful and share them with other educators and aspiring educators in a variety of capacities.

Works Cited

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. Common Core

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

As the culmination of their study of William Shakespeare’s The Tempest (or any other Shakespearean play), students explore theme and character by working in small groups to compose a 50-line choral reading made by cutting and rearranging lines from the play. They then choreograph, rehearse, and perform the choral reading for the class. This activity engages students in thinking about the relationships among language, character, and theme, and it offers an authentic performance activity different from traditional speech or scene presentations. Be sure to watch the video of the students performing! http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/constructing-understanding-through-choral-1121.html