This issue, *Common Core, Rotten Core?*, offers readers historical tracings, perspectives, arguments, and strategies for implementation of the Common Core State Standards. To close out the issue, this month’s “Conversation Currents” addresses the framing of CCSS by corporations and businesses, computer-based assessment systems, and the de-professionalism of teachers. Patrick Shannon, Professor at Penn State University, along with Anne Whitney, Associate Professor at Penn State University, and Maja Wilson, Lecturer at the University of Maine, discuss their perspectives and viewpoints on the impact of the CCSS on our educational system and history.

Patrick Shannon, a former preschool and primary grade teacher, is a professor of education at Penn State University. He teaches in and supervises the Reading Specialist Certification Program and the Master’s portion of the Integrated Undergraduate-graduate Program for both Special Education and the Curriculum and Instruction department. Several of his noted publications include *Closer Readings of the Common Core* (2013), *Reading Wide Awake* (2011), and *Reading Poverty in America* (2014).

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Maja Wilson is the author of *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment* published by Heinemann in 2006, which won the James Britton Award given by the National Council of Teachers of English in 2007. She taught English in Michigan’s public schools for 10 years before pursuing her doctorate in Composition Studies at the University of New Hampshire. While finishing her dissertation, she taught literacy methods courses at the University of Maine for three years. Maja has published in journals such as *English Journal, Education Week*, and the *Journal of Teaching Writing* on issues including writing assessment, response to student writing, teacher agency, the accountability movement, and the Common Core State Standards. Her most recent project has been to instigate and coauthor the Human Readers Petition, a protest signed by over 4000 writing professionals and scholars against the use of machine essay scoring in high-stakes testing, including assessments of the Common Core State Standards.

This excerpted conversation was recorded on January 11, 2013, and has been edited for publication. The full conversation is available as a podcast at http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts.
teachers have been aligning their instruction and curriculum with the new ELA Standards that, for all appearances and rhetoric, are designed to prepare students for college and/or to enter the work force. There are a number of topics we can explore with the Common Core, but for this conversation, we thought we would focus on three big areas: the commercialization and neoliberal policies behind these Standards and the upcoming assessment systems, the assumptions about teaching and teacher improvement that give the Common Core State Standards their meaning, and the decisions that are likely to be made by many stakeholders and players involved.

So if we start with the first area, the commercialization and big business of the Standards and assessments, it might be important to provide a bit of the backstory of how the Common Core State Standards came into being and the relationship of these Standards to neoliberal policies—the role of business groups in their development and the federal government in their implementation. We thought Pat could start us off with a little bit of discussion around this backstory that might give a context for the next two areas.

**Pat:** Sure. We have basically two sides to the official rationale for the Common Core State Standards. There’s one that’s heard more often, the liberal one, and then there’s, as you said, sort of a backstory of how this happened, the neoliberal side. Larry Cuban, on his website for education policy [http://larrycuban.wordpress.com/], defines policy as both a hypothesis and an argument that a particular action should be taken to solve a problem. That action, however, has to be politically acceptable and economically feasible. Any attitude that we have about Common Core depends on how we name and frame the problem. We must have a hypothesis concerning why the Common Core movement will solve or won’t solve a particular problem, and we must make an argument with evidence that the Common Core is best among all competing alternatives (and there are quite a few out there that could compete).

Liberals explain that Common Core is necessary because of a global innovation economy that’s changing America’s economic position in the world and threatening the American way of life. Federal intervention is necessary because No Child Left Behind’s deference to state standards and tests did not solve the problem of helping us stabilize and raise our economic standing. According to the liberals, the solution to America’s economic woes is to improve schools with common core standards and tests that will raise student achievement, productivity, and ability to innovate. There are problems, though, with liberal naming and framing—and it starts with its evidentiary base (Shannon, 2013).

**Maja:** That’s an issue that interests me because even if it’s true, there’s a lot of evidence that US schools are doing fairly well given the effects of poverty. A recent UNICEF report places US child poverty second among developed nations; only Romania is worse. And other governments and countries that have similarly high poverty rates in terms of income—like Canada and the UK—do more to lessen the effects of poverty than the US. So even if teachers and students are failing and need to improve, that fact doesn’t necessarily support the current reform structure. So from my point of view, the first thing you have to understand about the Common Core State Standards is that they exist as a single gear in the accountability or the school reform machine, and to me you can’t understand that gear unless you understand the machine—what it’s designed to do and how it’s designed to do it.

I have already spoken out about what I think the Common Core State Standards, in terms of the Reading Standards, get wrong. I think they get a lot wrong, but the machine won’t really be improved if you just improve the Standards themselves, not if that machine is designed to go about the job of school reform in a destructive and ill-advised way. And it is destructive and ill-advised. I think that the assumptions behind
how that machine is put together and what it’s
designed to do are worth taking a close look at.
And I think the first assumption built into this
machine of school reform or accountability is
that people won’t be motivated to improve un-
less there are rewards and punishments involved.
So it’s essentially a behaviorist machine—and
that’s where the sanctions and incentives of No
Child Left Behind and Race to the Top come in.

Of course, No Child Left Behind is heavier
on sanctions, and Race to the Top is heavier on
incentives, but it’s still a behaviorist machine,
and the assumption is that people won’t improve
unless you give them punishments or rewards.
In order to determine who gets punished and
who gets rewarded in this machine, you have to
have assessments, and those assessments have
to be objective and standardized because you’re
making determinations about who gets what
resources and who doesn’t. And so those assess-
ments have to be based on standards, and that’s
where the Common Core State Standards come
in. They were written to serve this particular
machine of accountability in school reform.

Remember, however, that those are un-
founded assumptions about what motivates
people and what produces quality work. So, for
example, when you put the focus on results, you
undermine pupils’ investment in their work; you
reduce the quality of their thinking. We know
this about individuals; psychological studies
have shown this. And I think it’s true on a larger
scale, too, that when you build an accountability
machine based upon an unproven, unfounded
model of psychological motivation, then it’s
bound to fail. I think we have years and years of
this structured failing. What’s different about the
Common Core State Standards is that it’s just an
attempt to nationalize it—to make it standard-
ized on a larger scale. To me, those assumptions
about what motivates people are really disturb-
ing. They have been proven not to work in the
past, so I don’t see why they would work now.

Pat: I like what you are talking about. You
suggest that the gap between schooling for the
poor and schooling for the high middle class
is the real problem. David Berliner (2009) and
others (Bracey, 2009; Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013;
Krashen, Lee, & McQuillan, 2010) who have
analyzed international test scores show the gap
directly. Students from schools in well-to-do
communities score as high or higher than anyone
else internationally. And students from schools
that serve poor neighborhoods and lower middle
class neighborhoods score toward the bottom.
When you look at the average, we’re somewhere
in the middle; we have a type of schooling that
works for some, but not for all. If you name the
problem that way, then Common Core doesn’t
seem to be the solution.

Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institute
cites studies that show that test score variance
is four or five times higher within states than
among states (Loveless, 2012). If standards were
the solution to the income achievement gap, then
state standards should have dramatically reduced
such variance within a given state, and the gaps
between states with high standards and rigor
should show student achievement greatly above
states judged to have low standards and rigor.
That hasn’t happened. In fact, that gap has wid-
ened by 40 percent since 1970 (Reardon, 2011),
and that finding casts doubt on the empirical
impact of common standards as the solution.

Maja offers a different frame for school reform
that would require a different hypothesis and a
different argument.

Anne: I really like
the metaphor of the
frame. I think of it as a
square or a rectangle that
includes some things and
leaves some things out.
Talk about the Com-
mon Core— both in the
political rhetoric around
it and in the documents
themselves—includes some problems that are
manageable and excludes some other problems
that are either rendered inadmissible or dis-
carded as unmanageable. “Poverty is a given,”
right? So the thinking is, “Let’s just frame what
we can do.” Then, what ends up inside the frame
has layers to it. On the front layer, the picture
that you see, we put that we’re going to raise
standards and accountability. Then behind that
are all these assumptions about what kids are
like and what teachers are like. Maja, you started
to speak to this when you talked about what
motivates people.

I think that there are two assumptions about
school and about what teachers and learners do
in school that warrant some discussion. One assumption is that the problem with education is a problem with content (what is taught), and the second is that the problem with education is a problem with teachers (their expectations and actions). Those two problems are presented as solvable by centralizing decision making about the content of what’s taught.

In the first assumption—that teachers were making wrong decisions about content—the argument goes like this: Teachers were differentially exposing some kids to helpful content and other kids to hurtful content. Or rigorous and un-rigorous content. Or important content and unimportant content. That’s where you get comments like David Coleman’s famous statement, “People don’t really give a shit about what you feel or what you think” (http://usny.nysed.gov/rtt/resources/bringing-the-common-core-to-life.html). Teachers, the argument goes, were spending too much time on unimportant things like personal experience and feelings. So the solution to that problem is that we’re going to centralize all of the decisions about content. Someone else can make those decisions about what content to teach, because teachers can’t be trusted to do that.

The second assumption is that what teachers do in classrooms is deliver content. All of us who’ve spent time in classrooms, including those of us who were just learners, know that what happens in classrooms isn’t just the delivery of content. There’s a relationship that happens. There’s manipulating content, whatever it may be. There’s thinking about things, talking about things, and interrogating things. Right? And classrooms aren’t content delivery factories. Teachers aren’t content delivery mechanisms any more than kids are containers for the content. But the picture frame that we use to talk about Common Core is designed to highlight content and to use content as the lever for everything else. The current approach about assessment, then, bolsters this idea that content was either delivered or wasn’t. It just makes it seem so simple.

Pat: Maja’s framing of the problem is, as Cuban would say, considered politically unacceptable or economically unfeasible. Legislators are not willing to put money into the solution of raising the income of poverty groups so that the social relations and the opportunities that they have are similar to those communities that schools are serving well. They’re just not willing to do it. So, the effects of poverty become officially characterized as schools’ and teachers’ “soft bigotry of low expectations.” Once you start to destabilize people’s local commitment to the teachers and schools as institutions, you start to make it possible for what Maja called the machine of school reform. And Anne starts to discuss the other side of the rationale for the Common Core Standards—the neoliberal side.

I want to read a statement that Bill Gates made at the National Council for State Legislators in 2009: “Identifying common standards is just the starting point. We’ll only know if this effort has succeeded when the curriculum and the tests are aligned to these standards. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently announced that 350 million dollars of the stimulus package is to be used to create just these kinds of tests—next generation assessments aligned with the Common Core. When the tests are aligned with the Common Core Standards, the curriculum will line up as well, and it will unleash a powerful market of people providing services for better teaching. For the first time there will be a large uniform base of customers looking at using products that can help every kid learn and every teacher get better.” So what do you think? [laughter]. That’s the system that Maja’s talking about; it presents the role of business that LA editors started with in the introduction, and it turns business (“people providing services”) into teachers, and teachers and students into consumers as Anne just mentioned.

According to Gates, the solution is not getting high standards or something like that, it’s not developing more knowledgeable understanding of what literacy might be and do for students. Rather, it’s to open up this market so that innovators, businesses, can insert themselves at the testing level, at the curriculum development level, at the instructional level, in order to meet a “uniform base of customers looking at using products that can help every kid learn and every teacher get better.” This neoliberal side of Common Core comes to us through private, not public, channels. Achieve Inc. started in 1996 and was charged to develop graduation standards...
for high schools that would make the graduates more productive and more innovative. Then, with the funding of corporations and foundations (but not from the federal government), Achieve started this slow march to produce the consensus that schools aren’t working, that there is one set of career and college-ready standards, and that the solution to school reform has to be made in the market. Professional educators and the public got very few peeks at Common Core before it was delivered as complete.

**Maja:** Pat, you were talking about that quote from Gates. If you haven’t spent time in classrooms watching teachers and students working together, or if you haven’t been a teacher and seen what that’s like from the inside out, I think that what Gates says makes a certain kind of sense simply because it’s familiar. It’s a familiar kind of rhetoric that people have been applying to lots of things for a long time. But you know, going back to what Anne said about how this neoliberal frame misses so much, if you spend time in classrooms with teachers and with children, you know that relationships matter. It’s relationships between people, but it’s also the relationships that the teachers help students to build with content and with skills. So another thing that comes into play through this is that teaching practices are expressions of beliefs that teachers have about literacy and about how children learn. You can’t just mandate that from the top down, because people can go through the motions of whatever it is you say they need to do. But if you’re not working from the inside—this issue of beliefs and a teacher’s beliefs about learning and about literacy—then you’re not really doing any kind of deep work for school improvement that I think needs to be done.

Chris Gallagher is someone who has written about the neoliberal assessment scene, and he talks about all of the things Pat has been talking about: about how the neoliberal solution to the problem of education has been framed and how it’s been proposed. But he says that we need to propose a new sort of “principle of principles” for our discussions about education. And the principle that he proposes is “Being There Matters.” And I think that’s such a powerful principle—“Being There Matters”—because when you’re there in the classroom watching the teachers, watching the children, or being one of the pupils in those relationships, you’re there. And that matters because you see what matters, and you realize that these grand plans that Bill Gates has for how it is that we’re going to improve education just don’t make any sense. They don’t work, and they’re missing so much. We need to preserve what it is that matters, and I think we can only do that from the ground up.

**Anne:** I really appreciate what you said about beliefs. I think it’s true that teaching practices are expressions of beliefs. I like the way you put that. I actually think that the architects of the current movement are well aware of the importance of beliefs, and that’s why they have made efforts to replace veteran teachers with newer teachers whose beliefs are seen as more malleable and who have had no time to develop beliefs about education. They’ve had five-week boot camp instead of a multi-year program. They’ve had less exposure to knowledgeable people, less exposure to highly principled educators—whether in the person of university professors, or of career teachers with good backgrounds of practice and research in teaching, or in the written discourse of our field. And they have reduced the numbers of teachers overall, as well. I think there is a new openness to gigantic class size. And then there are efforts to dismantle university teacher education programs where beliefs are instilled and where practices are explicitly connected to beliefs. To me, those are all knowing and conscious moves that are being made, as opposed to a set of coincidences.

I actually think that’s one of the areas where teachers themselves can get political in ways that might be effective locally—by starting to articulate these beliefs and how teaching practices are parts of beliefs. For example, here in central Pennsylvania, there’s a group of teachers who write for the local paper (Whitney & Badiali, 2010). The pieces they write are not always expressly political, but they are descriptions of teaching practices with some of the beliefs...
around them. “I have kids do choice reading books. Here’s why I do that.” “Students in my classroom begin each day writing in journals, and here’s why I do that.” “I have playtime in kindergarten, and here’s why I do that.” These are editorials written by teachers that help to articulate this idea that teaching practices flow from beliefs. Even when they do not explicitly react to the Common Core, they are informing parents and others in the community that teachers are doing things for reasons, thoughtful and informed reasons, and that we ought to consult them for guidance about what they are doing.

Other places where teachers are speaking up include social media spaces: Badass Teachers (http://www.badaassteacher.org), Teachers Speak Up (founded by Steve Zemelman and others; http://teachersspeakup.com), and the network of Teacher Activist Groups (http://www.teacheractivistgroups.org), such as those at Garfield High School in Seattle who collectively resisted mandated testing in their school.

Anne: Well, when I have talked informally with teachers and parents about the Common Core or related reform matters, they’ll often say the words “Common Core” to mean “a test.” When I first encountered that, I would hear it as a mistake. Like, “Oh, this is someone who is not informed about the difference between standards and assessment tools.” But I now think it’s just a verbal shortcut. They absolutely do understand that Common Core is supposed to be a set of standards that would then shape content, which would then be assessed in some way. But they see through it. In practice, the Common Core is in fact a set of tests that is going to come, for which they need to be prepared. And so that’s the frame for the discourse. When I’m sitting around the table with teachers, they’re saying, “I have kids do choice reading books. Here’s why I do that.” “Students in my classroom begin each day writing in journals, and here’s why I do that.” “I have playtime in kindergarten, and here’s why I do that.” These are editorials written by teachers that help to articulate this idea that teaching practices flow from beliefs. Even when they do not explicitly react to the Common Core, they are informing parents and others in the community that teachers are doing things for reasons, thoughtful and informed reasons, and that we ought to consult them for guidance about what they are doing.

Pat: One implication of Gates’s statement is that he wants more technological smart tools and fewer human body smart tools in schools. He mentions tests, services, and products that will make teachers better. Teachers are to be consumers, not agents. Anne’s group does not accept that positioning and contests it in public spaces. I’m not sure that type of agency is available in the official professional development literature for Common Core. At least not in the way it’s being portrayed through its various forms of YouTube curriculum.

Maja: Of course, the technological solutions are interesting, and those will come into play in interesting ways. The two groups that are creating assessments for the Common Core State Standards (and states have signed on to these assessments without even seeing them, just like the Standards) are both proposing to use machine essay scoring for the writing assessments. One of the groups has backed off a little bit, just saying that the technology is not ready yet, but when it is, we’ll look into it. And, of course, we’ve been talking about these Standards without talking about the assessments, but the Standards don’t mean much until the assessments come into play, because teachers and districts will be making decisions on the basis of the assessments and how the assessments interpret and portray the Standards.

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At a certain point, Standards won’t mean much, because the sanctions will be imposed on the basis of the assessments, and improvement will be determined by how well you can get your scores to go up. The Standards might talk a good talk about depth, for instance, or really grappling with complex texts, or writing complex arguments, but if those complex arguments are scored by machines, and you can simply put in any facts that you want, whether or not they’re true, then I don’t understand how the Standards mean anything. Because the Standards were created to be the basis for the tests, we can’t really judge the Standards without seeing the assessments that will actually give them life (or death in this case.)
students’ reading proficiency dropped 30 percent between the previous state test and the new Common Core test. In New York, the state paid $56 million to implement PARCC tests before the state’s Common Core curriculum was available. New York proficiency rates dropped by 30 percent, also. At least Georgia has balked at the expense of the tests, computers to administer the tests, and the scoring, and Georgia’s governor is discussing the possibility of dropping out of Common Core altogether. After the New York results were made public, Arne Duncan gave Common Core altogether. After the New York tests, and the scoring, and Georgia’s governor is discussing the possibility of dropping out of Common Core curriculum was available. New York proficiency rates dropped by 30 percent, also. At least Georgia has balked at the expense of the tests, computers to administer the tests, and the scoring, and Georgia’s governor is discussing the possibility of dropping out of Common Core altogether. After the New York results were made public, Arne Duncan gave Common Core altogether. After the New York results were made public, Arne Duncan gave states a pass on using Common Core test scores in the teacher evaluation systems required in the Race to the Top grants. Although Gates imagines the tests as the starting point, they might prove to be an endpoint for Common Core.

Anne: I think it’s really important that we be smart about how teachers and others communicate with parents and the community about the problems with Common Core and related tests. You know, when we talk with parents or when we talk to the community, we can call on people’s memories of school—relationships that they had with teachers that were important or memorable literacy experiences that they had—and use these to make our arguments. Similarly, we can be aware of places where their past experiences offer no reference points or poor reference points, and there we can supply information. For example, few, if any, parents have had the experience of taking a computer-based exam. Because of that, they don’t see some of the differences that Pat’s talking about, in terms of what is reading or writing about when it moves from print to the screen? Just that simple transition—what are the differences in reading or writing when it’s surrounded by higher or different stakes compared to the kinds of tests that parents took when they were children in schools? So that’s a real difference where people’s memories of their own schooling do us disservice and where we have to help people understand what the issues are.

The computerized scoring of writing is another example. That wasn’t available to those of us who are of a certain age, so it’s the kind of thing that, at the outset, sounds kind of efficient and helpful to parents. People say, “Oh, well, when I started writing on a word processor, writing really got easier.” And I think that they see it as innovation in those benign terms without understanding the ways that computerized scoring undermines the dialogue between human beings that really is the basis of writing. It ceases to be writing when there’s not a human being at the other end. So those are things that we really have to help communities think about, because they are places where people’s prior experience doesn’t serve.

Maja: I think that’s a really important point, Anne, that parents can really be our allies in this, because I think that there is a kind of rhetoric that people use when talking about education—oh, schools are failing—and it just sort of rolls off people’s lips. But when you really do get them talking about their experiences and their children’s experiences, something different emerges. Engaging in these conversations and helping parents name what’s emerging from their lived experience and comparing that with the commonplace assumptions that they may have accepted about education is an important process.

A couple years ago, Kaplan and Gallup collaborated on a poll, and it showed that parents across the nation, by and large, value descriptive assessments and artifacts of learning more than they do test scores and standardized tests. I did a small study with an eighth-grade teacher who did lots of descriptive feedback, and she would send parents these very long letters about their children’s progress as readers and writers. She spent all this time doing these letters, but she got back only four responses from parents, and those responses were what’s the grade? She thought “Oh no! The parents really aren’t valuing this.”

So I went in with a colleague and did parent interviews. Once we got parents talking about their children’s experience, they really did value this assessment—these descriptive narrative forms of assessment and the artifacts of learning that she was sending home. But they had been conditioned by schools to think that what you do if you’re a parent is you care about grades and the computer-based grading systems like School Web. Parents can go and click on such sites and see their kids’ real-time grades for every class. Those sorts of programs reinforce this message to parents that grades are what’s important; as parents, what you [should] care about is the grade. But I think that parents really do care about the deeper issues, and I think we can use

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that to engage in conversations that help them see the difference.

LA: We’re going to have to cut in here, because our time is up, but this has been a fantastic conversation. We really like the way we started with how we go about naming and framing the argument, how there are multiple arguments under this one umbrella, and how we think about teacher decision making and advocacy and the idea that we are not paying attention to the real work of relationship building in classrooms. That helped us move to thinking about the assessments, as well as the difficulties and challenges related to machine scoring assessments. Finally, we discussed how we can help parents understand the deeper issues related to the use of technology for assessments, and how without those experiences as part of their background, we need to work together to reframe it for them. Are there any closing comments any of the three of you would like to make?

Pat: I’d like to end by stating that our conversation was held in the spirit of Common Core Anchor Standard 8 for Reading: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence. We’ve applied this Standard to Common Core and found its liberal and neoliberal rationales lacking evidence and argument.

LA: We want to thank Pat, Anne, and Maja for their thoughtful insights and contributions to the national dialogue and the ongoing conversation around the Common Core Standards. Thank you all.

Maja: I’m just really happy that Language Arts is taking on this issue. I think it’s a gutsy move in these times. So thank you for engaging in this conversation with us.

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