

The Text Itself

By Tom Newkirk

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

I'll begin by admitting that it is difficult for me to approach this issue in an unbiased way. I have already written an *Education Week* commentary in which I argued that the new standards are wildly unrealistic—that they take the top performance level for various grades and make them the expectation for everyone.¹ This strikes me as a continuation of the magical thinking of *No Child Left Behind*, where schools are punished for not achieving 100 percent proficiency.

A more serious issue is the view of reading itself spelled out by two authors of the English/Language standards David Coleman and Susan Pimentel in a set of guidelines that is 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. I will focus on these guidelines.

Much of what Coleman and Pimentel say is appealing. I like the focus on deep sustained reading—and rereading. It is exactly the kind of reading I explore in my new book, *The Art of Slow Reading*. 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 walls of the text. And only then is that prior knowledge, personal association, and appraisal allowed in.

This seems to me an inhuman, even impossible, and certainly unwise prescription. Take my own reading of their guidelines. When I came to the term “the text itself,” I immediately tried to place their argument in a tradition, thinking of



I. A. Richard's *Practical Criticism*.² The expression also brought up my reaction to Richard's and the limitations of his reading method—including the critique of Louise Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration*.³ Paradoxically the term, “the text itself,” sent me outside the text itself. Should I have waited until I had understood it before making this association? Could I have done this even if I had tried?

Or take an *Atlantic* essay that I often use with my students, Nicholas Carr's “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”⁴ Carr is clearly provoking us to make an appraisal right away, to use our experience right away. We are invited to ask ourselves if technology is having a negative effect on us. Some students go along with Carr, some fight him, but it is difficult for me to imagine any of them holding off a response until the essay is fully “understood.” It's like saying, “I will comprehend this movie, and only then will I turn my mind to the question of whether I like it.”

Bad things happen to good ideas when they become mandates.

This issue gets to the heart of my problem with the reading model in the guidelines. While Coleman and Pimentel use language we might associate with a transactional view of reading, they create a sterile and, in my view, inhumanly fractured model of what goes on in deep reading. To maintain the fiction of “the text itself” they must deny processes that go on in a robust and meaningful act of reading. And it is their metaphors that give them away—they consistently use metaphors of *extraction* to describe the reading process:

“drawing knowledge from the text itself”

“acquisition of knowledge”

“Complex text is a rich repository”

“they need to read and extract knowledge and insight”

“gathering evidence, knowledge and insight from what they read”

“Close reading and gathering information from

specific texts should be at the heart of classroom activities . . .”⁵

The text, according to these metaphors, is some kind of territory, an expanse in which “knowledge, evidence, and insight” preexist prior to any reading act. The job of the student is to locate and “gather” or “extract” or pull from a “repository.” These metaphors allow the authors to maintain the fiction of “the text itself” or “the text on its own terms” because knowledge is somehow contained within the four walls of the text. But in doing so, Coleman and Pimentel must deny (or compartmentalize) the rich recursive interplay of the personal, generational, cultural, and textual dimensions of reading.

So, yes, we have to stress careful attention to reading selections. We need to introduce complex texts. We have to probe for depth and encourage multiple readings. And, yes, making a collage is not always the best way to do it. But going back to this sterile view of reading is not the answer.

It may appear from this criticism that my concern is with the application or interpretation of the standards, and not with the standards themselves. I do believe that there will be a virtual gold rush of interpreters, consultants, and developers of curriculum that will be—inevitably—“standards-based.” Some of this will be total junk. The profession needs to be vigilant and engaged in this act of “translation.” Other commentaries put forth by Heinemann are important contributions in this regard.

But if the standards, themselves, represent “good ideas,” they are “good ideas with an army behind them.” We cannot bracket them off from their coercive function. They are imposed, top-down. They were adopted by states before they were even fully formulated, literally before the ink was dry, in order to apply for Race to the Top funds. And usually with only token input from those who must live by them. They will be used to assess teachers in ways that, I for one, abhor. This undemocratic political context is relevant.

The history of educational reform is littered with top-down mandates that have failed, that have been met with

resistance, commercial exploitation, and misunderstanding, especially when teachers have no agency in their creation. Bad things happen to good ideas when they become mandates. We may think that this time is different—but I wouldn’t bet on it.

References:

1. Newkirk, Thomas. 2010. “Standards and the Art of Magical Thinking.” *Education Week*, 29:33 (June 9) 29.
2. Richards, I. A. 1929. *Practical Criticism: A Study in Literary Judgment*. New York: Harvest.
3. Rosenblatt, Louise. 1938/1995. *Literature as Exploration (Fifth Edition)*. New York: Modern Language Association.
4. Carr, Nicholas. 2008. “Is Google Making Us Stupid.” Available at: www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/
5. Coleman, David and Susan Pimentel. 2011. *Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades 3–12*. Available at: www.corestandards.org/assets/Publishers_Criteria_for_3-12.pdf

This is an opinion article presented by Heinemann author Tom Newkirk. To continue to engage with Tom and Heinemann regarding Common Core State Standards topics, go to www.heinemann.com/pd/journal.

Tom Newkirk, recipient of the University of New Hampshire’s prestigious Lindberg Award in 2010, is the author of numerous Heinemann titles. His *Misreading Masculinity* was cited by *Instructor Magazine* as one of the most significant books for teachers in the past decade. Tom also wrote the books *Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones* and *The Performance of Self in Student Writing* which won NCTE’s David H. Russell Award for Research. His latest Heinemann title *The Art*

of Slow Reading explores the importance of deep, focused, thoughtful reading. A former teacher at an at-risk high school in Boston, Tom now teaches at the University of New Hampshire and directs the New Hampshire Literacy Institutes.

Tom has also written professional journal articles regarding his perspectives on the Common Core State Standards.

