**Common Core Concerns**

**Discussion Points Bulletin**

**ELA Instructional Approach and the Pursuit of Truth**

One instructional shift required to “deliver on the promise” (Coleman, Pimental, & Zimba, 2012, p.1) of the Common Core standards is “Reading and writing grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational” (Coleman et al., 2012, p. 2). This seems like an innocuous standard, and it is until one looks at the highly prescriptive instructional approach of “close reading” that is embedded in teacher professional development and advanced by the authors of Common Core as the essential instructional method for all English language arts. This highly prescriptive approach places primacy on the text and ignores student opinion or outside knowledge, limiting the time and ability to pursue the truth of the text.

The method advanced by the writers of the standards is what they call Close Analytic Reading or Close Reading and is very similar to a literary approach used in the 1940s and 1950s called New Criticism (Brizee & Tompkins, 2011). According to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) one of the two testing consortia funded by the federal government to assess the standards:

Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole. (PARCC, 2011, p. 7)

There are several different methods to analyze literature, such as reader/response, moral criticism, and structuralism (Brizee & Tompkins, 2011), yet the authors of the Common Core have chosen and advanced only one method, Close Reading, a kin to New Criticism.

New Criticism focuses on a systematic analysis of the text, objectifying the relationship between the text and its form, limiting the text to itself, and negating the reader’s response and/or the author’s intentions (Delahoyde, n.d.; Murfin & Ray, 1998). New Criticism does not seek external socio-political or historical perspectives, and Delahoyde (n.d.) states

The goal then is not the pursuit of sincerity or authenticity, but subtlety, unity, and integrity—and these are properties of the text, not the author. The work is not the author’s; it was detached at birth. The author’s intentions are “neither available nor desirable,” (para. 3)

and that “meaning exists on the page, the meaning of the text is intrinsic and should not be confused with the author’s intentions nor the work’s affective dimensions” (Delahoyde, n.d., para. 3).

Here we see a limiting of the pursuit of truth by the actual formula used to analyze the text. Not only is the pursuit of truth thwarted, but with New Criticism, the author’s actual position is as well!

While the close reading approach advocated by the CCSS authors *does* rely heavily upon the search for the author’s explicit and implied themes, many aspects of close reading are comparable to the New Criticism approach. For instance, teachers are to give the text to the students with little to no background information and are not to add additional pieces of information to the discussion; something other reading experts recommend doing (NCTE, 2004; Steven, 1982). The selected text itself sets the parameters of the discussion and students are to answer questions from evidence within the text. If students do not respond as having learned the position of the author, the teacher is to review the author’s points again citing evidence from the text, so that the students all arrive at the author’s viewpoint.

For example, here’s a close reading lesson from the Teaching Channel titled *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: The Secrets Behind What You Eat* by Michael Pollan. In the YouTube video (Stabrowski, 2014), the teacher demonstrates how to guide a group of students through a series of questions to see how the author has personified corn as an evil King and how corn has chased poor innocent animals and other crops off of the farm. If the students do not arrive at the conclusion that corn is evil, then the teacher stated she would have to rewind (meaning re-teach) that portion of the lesson so that the students all understood this fact. Students were to read the text once to get the gist of the text. Then the teacher, or a good reader, would read the text aloud while the students listened and thought about the text-dependent (pre-made) questions they were given to answer. Next the student would answer the questions, perhaps sharing their answers with their neighbor, and finally, the entire class would discuss the questions and answers. Students were not to go outside of the text to research whether corn had any nutritional benefits or how it is exported to feed other countries during the lesson at this time. They were not to bring up any personal thoughts about corn; only evidence from the text was to be used. They were then instructed to correct or add to their answers so that they were in conformity with the class discussion. Here we have a very concerted effort, and an entire class period, directed to making sure students have an exact understanding of what the author’s intentions, both explicit (with evidence from the text) and implied are. Students have read the author’s point of view, discussed the author’s point of view, and written about the author’s point of view. By this time, they are invested in the author’s point of view. It is pretty hard for an elementary or middle school student to disagree after this much effort has been put into understanding the author’s viewpoint.

Pearson (2013), a member of the Common Core Validation Committee and proponent of the standards, stated that these recommendations for close reading seemed to squelch the activation of students’ prior knowledge (since all knowledge is remanded to the text), and the *freedom* to evaluate and compare is based upon this prohibited “outside” knowledge. While he is concerned about the fact that cognitive learning theory is being neglected by this approach, he raises a more important issue – the suppression of *freedom* by the students and teachers to include other perspectives and considerations in addition to those advocated by the text and the author. Pearson simply explains this as a misunderstanding on the part of the authors on the process of comprehension and that prior knowledge cannot be turned off or on *at will.* Pearson queries that when one learns about the authors’ points, can one then use that information to build upon the next selected reading of the author, extending the first selected text into the second, into the entire chapter, into the book, or must the reader be remanded to the selected piece in front of them?

Pearson (2013) points this out as a conundrum built within this recommended approach by the authors of the Common Core and here is the telling point, he states that “*Text* and *knowledge* are the *standards by which the validity* of comprehension is judged (my emphasis*)*” (p. 10) and doesn’t point to the pursuit of objective truth to measure the text and knowledge to! With this approach, it all comes back to what the document says (“If it’s in print, it must be true”) and how the individuals within the social context perceive it.

To the Common Core authors’ credit, the *Revised Publisher’s Criteria* does mention the applicability of student prior knowledge, but then again states that this knowledge “should not replace attention to the text itself” (p. 7). Confining individuals to the auspices of their own background knowledge and the point of view of the text rewards subjectivity and relativity instead of Truth, something Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI continues to warn against (2014). Concluding a lesson without having the opportunity to discuss other viewpoints that might in fact contain the Truth, opens wide the door for doubt, misinformation, and even fallacy to solidify in the student’s mind. In catechesis this would be like leaving students adrift after speaking about creation and the fall, putting off until later the promise of the resurrection. If these texts are so important to be analyzed in the light of close reading, then they are important enough to be read in the light of *all* of the viewpoints and perspectives that surround them.

Perhaps, though, one reason the authors of the Common Core are such proponents of this close reading method is that with evidence restricted to the text, assessing student responses are limited to the text as well making grading easier for teachers and test companies alike. Including opinion responses or refutable points of view are not as efficient to grade since they require the determination of correctness by the grader – and this takes time. But isn’t this what the standards say they are aiming for – deeper and more critical thinking? Wouldn’t allowing a student to assert and justify alternative evidence using a more varied set of strategic thinking skills such as evaluation, analysis, and hypothesis better satisfy this requirement of deeper thinking?

Teachers in Catholic schools are called to lead their pupils to the Truth through evidence from the text and texts beyond the text! From *The Catholic School* we read,

The school considers human knowledge as a truth to be discovered. In the measure in which *subjects are taught by someone who knowingly and without restraint seeks the truth (emphasis added)*, they are to that extent Christian. Discovery and awareness of truth leads man to the discovery of Truth itself. (para. 41)

Using the methodology of close reading and a reconstituted literary approach of New Criticism is antithetical to the pursuit of truth we are called to in Catholic schools. Catholic schoolchildren might be best served by teachers who use the literary approach of Moral Criticism, where text is analyzed for teachings of wisdom, grace, beauty, and virtue instead of this restrictive approach.

A Catholic school philosophy includes the development of the whole child, including the spiritual dimension, where one comes to know the Trinity, the Blessed Mother, and the saints in a more intimate way. Built on a Christian anthropology of man, Catholic schools assist parents with not only the natural, but also the very vibrant and real supernatural dimension of life as a child of God.

With this charge, the purpose of Catholic schools is not only to help children lead good and purpose-filled lives, but also to open the door and offer the path to eternal life. Archbishop J. Michael Miller, CSB, former Secretary for the Congregation for Catholic Education, wrote

All too many Catholic schools fall into the trap of a secular academic success culture, putting their Christological focus and its accompanying understanding of the human person in second place. Christ is ‘fitted in’ rather than being the school’s vital principle (2006, p. 26).

He goes on to say that “This conviction about the nature of truth is too important for Catholics to be confused about” (p. 46) and “Unlike skeptics and relativists, Catholic educators share a specific belief about truth: that, to a limited but real extent, it can be attained and communicated to others” warning that

Catholic schools (should) take up the daunting task of freeing boys and girls from the insidious consequences of what Pope Benedict XVI has called the “dictatorship of relativism”—a dictatorship that cripples all genuine education. Catholic teachers are to cultivate in themselves and develop in others a passion for truth that defeats moral and cultural relativism. They are to educate “in the truth.” (p. 46)

Solomon (2003) states that standards represent a culture’s explicit statements that it “finds worthy of transmission” (p. 3). Our culture values a utilitarian approach to education that half-prepares our students for life beyond high school graduation. According to Archbishop Miller, “If a Catholic school is to *deliver on its promise* to provide students with an integral education, it must foster love for wisdom and *truth,* and must integrate faith, culture, and life” (p.45) by using instructional approaches that focus on much more than evidence from the text.

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