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THEORY

Looking Back to Look Ahead: What Would Louise Rosenblatt Say About the Common Core?

AMANDA STEARNS-PFEIFFER

“Since the first publication of this book, there have been various other such cyclic movements forward and backward. Despite this, there have been major democratic advances that must be preserved. Always there have been those who kept alive an understanding of our democratic ethos. I hope that transactions with this book may strengthen their defense of past achievements and their efforts to enhance the education of people for a democratic way of life.”

—Louise Rosenblatt, Preface to the Fifth Edition of *Literature as Exploration*

With the recent celebration of National Council of Teachers of English’s 100th year, there has been much talk about where we’ve been and where we’re going. In this reflective state of mind, I turn to one of our favorite scholars, Louise Rosenblatt, and I look at one of our current pedagogical concerns: the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). What would Louise Rosenblatt say about the CCSS?

I believe she would be alarmed, at the least, about the way the CCSS have threatened our interpretive rights as readers: the rights of teachers and our students alike.

Rosenblatt’s reader response theory acknowledges that different readers

may come away with different meanings from a text and that those varying interpretations should be respected. Educators have spent decades protecting the rights of our students to create their own meanings and situate texts in their own lives, though now the way we interpret texts, and the interpretive freedom that educators have been fighting to maintain, are being threatened by the CCSS in two distinct ways. The first has to do with our students and the emphasis that the CCSSs put on how our students read the texts in our classrooms. The second has to do with the way teachers are being asked to interpret (and therefore implement) the standards; in this scenario, the standards are the “text” and the teachers are the interpreters. Despite these challenges, the CCSS have the potential to be a catalyst for necessary and productive pedagogical reflection if teachers are given the necessary resources (time and curricular autonomy) in which to implement standards.

Our Students, the CCSS, and Reader Response

At the heart of this debate, as in all English education debates, is the success of our students. Although we continue to show the reasons why encouraging personal connections to reading is an important exercise in fostering student comprehension, engagement, and complex thought about texts, the CCSS

takes us one giant step away from helping our students see a text in any other way than from “thorough textual evidence” (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO] & National Governors Association [NGA], 2010, p. 38). There are ten specific Anchor Standards for Reading articulated in the CCSS, and there are only two places where any of them come close to fostering personal connections to a text.

The first place is in Anchor Standard for Reading #1: “Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.” At best, we can draw on the word inferences to suggest the slightest hint of accepting a personal interpretation (although I’m aware that many of my colleagues will disagree with this point, I want to provide a “best-case scenario” for readers).

Arguably, making an inference involves reading between the lines of a text, and not necessarily making outside connections between the text and a reader’s life, or other texts. Again, even when inferring meaning, a reader must look to the text for evidence of meaning; this, however, does allow for some freedom in interpretation, and showcases a skill less reliant on merely summarizing.

The second standard that may leave room for personal connections to

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a text is in Standard #10 with the word “scaffolding,” which allows teachers to include activities that promote personal connections to texts. But, as other English education scholars have pointed out, it is worrisome that we have to dig so deeply to find the places where interpretive freedom and personal connections are even possibly allowable, let alone encouraged. As Thomas Newkirk

see the world, think about themselves, or think about their neighbors will have far-reaching implications that go beyond an inability to read complex texts.

For example, in an upcoming edition of *English Journal*, students are asked to reflect on an “important lesson you have learned from a fictional or historical character you have read about in English class.” I wonder if students

lage is not always the best way to do that. And, for sure, bring on challenging texts. But going back to this sterile and humanly impossible view of reading is not the answer” (p. 28). Going back to a time when school was less democratic and systematically focused on preparing students for college moves us away from the “career skills” that the CCSS tout as important. Reading a text

Photograph by Derek Jensen

and Maja Wilson state, “We worry that if textbooks, curriculum, and assessments align themselves to the view of reading in the common-core guidelines, students will become alienated from the very complex texts with which they will be required to grapple” (p. 28). Alienating our students from the texts that have the potential to alter the way they

would be able to respond to this in a meaningful way if teachers were truly focused on the “efferent” as the Common Core suggest, rather than inspiring students to connect to the “aesthetic.” Again, Thomas Newkirk and Maja Wilson weigh in: “So, yes, we have to stress attention to the text and language. And, yes, building a diorama or making a col-

solely for the efferent, to use Rosenblatt’s term, undermines the reading experience that can enrich students’ lives in ways that reading only for textual meaning cannot. As Thomas Newkirk and Maja Wilson suggest, “That view—that students should focus on the “text itself”—is an echo of slogans from the early and mid-1900s. The text, the

guidelines say, should be understood on “its own terms,” and readers must fixate on “what lies within the four corners of the text” (p. 28).

This type of focus on the text harkens back to a time when the only types of students who were valued were those moving on to make a career out of academics. But what about the rest of our students? It seems like we have had this discussion before (probably because we have), and it seemed like we were making some improvements in the way we asked students to approach texts in our classrooms; i.e. not as unapproachable texts that held some secret meaning, but instead as potential ways of making different connections to (and in) the world. And, although we continue to show that what is more important to the success of our students (more than any test, mandate, or standard) is the quality of our teaching, then we should be very concerned with how the CCSS are affecting both our students and our teachers.

Teachers and the CCSS as a Text

Students’ interpretations of the texts they read are not the only interpretive freedoms the CCSS challenges. A standards document, whether produced by the state or by NCTE, is itself a “text” that is open to a certain amount of subjective interpretation. Following this viewpoint, teachers are the primary interpreters, and their “subjectivity” may be the result of a number of factors (individual areas of expertise, previous success with lessons, district/local concerns, comfort levels, etc.). The CCSS leave room, at least in writing, for a certain amount of subjectivity in teacher interpretation and implementation of the standards, and acknowledge

that this variance is not only unavoidable, but welcome: “While the Standards focus on what is most essential, they do not describe all that can or should be taught. A great deal is left to the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers” (CCSSO & NGA, 2010, p. 4).

Teachers likely teach best when they are presenting material with which they are comfortable and familiar. The standards as a text, therefore, are not meant to standardize but rather to coordinate the actions of English teachers so that some continuity between school districts and states exists.

One important aspect of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading is that the interpretation of any text relies to some degree on the history it carries with it. A reader’s background knowledge will always influence the way a text is read and interpreted. Similarly, a teacher’s pedagogical interests or personal expertise can lead him/her to read a standard a particular way, whereas another teacher might read the same standard in a way that fits his/her specific interests. Many readers have likely been present in meetings in which English teachers read the same standard and have vastly different ideas about how to meet that standard. Is one interpretation (or strategy for implementation) more “right” than another?

If we tell our teachers to provide textual evidence to support their interpretations, much like we tell our students who provide “different” interpretations of, say, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, then aren’t we holding ourselves to the same protocol to which we hold our students? The diversity in interpretation, and therefore in implementation, is something that we should welcome in our schools as we mentor teachers through the CCSS implementation process. Diversity in interpretation, however, is unfortunately

often seen as something that needs to be eradicated and streamlined; hence, districts take steps to streamline teachers and their curriculum.

Additionally, standards implementation often leads to a double dose of interpretation, as teachers are often asked to use standards by-product documents (sample units, pacing guides, etc.) to aid with their interpretation. Instead of teachers directly reading the standards and deciding how to implement them in their own classrooms, teachers are often asked to read secondary documents such as unit plans, terminology defining sheets, and curriculum maps—all documents created by individuals (other teachers, curriculum coordinators, and administrators) who underwent their own process of interpreting the standards documents.

The distance between the original standards document and the copy (the interpretation represented by the secondary document) is multiplied, and teachers are distanced from the original words, the original objective, and the original intent of the standards. The original standards documents, then, are subject to two rounds of outside influences on their interpretation before being implemented in the classroom.

Not All Implementation Processes Are the Same

Standards implementation processes vary greatly from one district to the next. Take for example the three very distinct ways of implementing the standards that Rebecca Bowers Sipe outlines in her 2009 text *Adolescent Literacy at Risk?* The first involves an intern teacher faced with prescriptive unit plans, the second shows an English department that receives important professional development training on

standards implementation, and the third showcases an English department that does not receive the same training. All three scenarios illustrate the vast differences in the implementation process from district to district. In my own work with teachers in standards implementation, I have observed an increasingly direct move toward standardization in our schools' curriculum.

As the intended direct recipient of standards information, teachers should be encouraged to read the text with an open mind about how to best "reach" each goal. If interpretation is left to individual teachers, then individual interpretations can lead to individualized lessons (which benefit our students more so than any mandated curriculum). Teachers are at their professional best when they have ownership over the content of their lessons, and the importance of curricular ownership is acknowledged in the CCSS in that the goals are outlined, but the means of reaching those goals are purposefully left open.

Unfortunately, though, in many districts the standards have become a way of regulating, rather than coordinating, the teachers' curriculum. Coordination may be necessary if teachers are expected to create (and then follow) standards by-products (such as curriculum checklists, pacing guides, and sample unit plans), but while teachers are supposed to individualize instruction and be "free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards" (CCSSO & NGA, 2010, p. 4), they are instead often being asked to teach like everyone else. Interpretations of how to implement standards should be left up to our teachers. We unfortunately hear, though, more and more accounts of districts adopting

scripted unit plans, which leave teachers feeling much like one teacher I interviewed who said, "Sometimes I feel like a substitute teacher in my own classroom."

Standards as a Source of Empowerment

One of the positive consequences of standards implementation the teachers I've worked with have cited is that the process provides teachers with opportunities to discuss and collaborate with their colleagues. Conversations about what goes on in their classrooms, and time to reflect on curriculum, are luxuries rarely afforded teachers.

The standards have the potential to be a catalyst for these important conversations, only, though, if teachers are given the trust to do so. By allowing teachers the time, trust, and resources for curricular reflection during standards implementation, this time-consuming process can perhaps generate positive changes in our schools. Fostering teacher collaboration and reflection might even help some districts figure out how to maintain a focus on the ways our students read and connect with texts. These changes, however, are probably not ones you can measure on any standardized test.

Sarah Brown Wessling's new important publication *Supporting Students in a Time of Core Standards* describes a situation that reflects teacher empowerment through standards implementation. What her text highlights, though, especially when compared to the situations many of us have encountered in the classroom, is how essential proper resources are for teacher (and therefore student) success. Time, classroom coverage while teachers are work-shopping the standards, adequate classroom texts,

and technology (a real luxury, but in keeping with the demands of almost every workplace): these represent just the tip of the iceberg in what resources are standing in the way for many teachers, yet are necessary for classrooms to reach their potential.

Whenever I work with teachers on standards implementation, I tell them to think of the standards as a doctrine of their rights in the classroom. In an educational environment that is increasingly concerned with accountability, if teachers can speak the language of the standards, familiarize themselves with what the standards are asking for, then they have armed themselves with the justification for their lessons.

As we move forward with the implementation of the CCSS, how can we take back the power for our teachers and students? We can be a voice of advocacy ("talking back persuasively," as Wessling calls it) for our teachers; let our politicians, policymakers, administrators, etc. know that the best way to achieve student success is to support our teachers with the resources they need (most importantly time and trust).

As classroom teachers, we can arm ourselves with the knowledge of what the CCSS actually say: most importantly, that the way the standards are designed is supposed to "leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed" (CCSSO & NGA, 2010, p. 4). Aside from arming themselves with the facts about the CCSS content, teachers can also help ensure their curricular autonomy in all phases of implementation by taking part in any of the following:

- Establish open communication with administrators and keep them informed of curricular changes in ELA due to the CCSS (teachers, not administrators, are the experts in their disciplines).
- Band together with your colleagues in creating curriculum that meets CCSS expectations, but also reflects the needs of your district and areas of teacher expertise.
- Invite key stakeholders (administrators, parents, etc.) into your classroom to see the innovative lessons in which you/your colleagues engage students in order to advocate for curricular autonomy.

Teachers can, if given the curricular freedom described in Wessling's text, still help students make those important personal connections, as described by Rosenblatt, to the reading while "meeting" the standards. Reading literature does not have to be an exercise in rote memorization or a cold calculation of "what the teacher wants."

In the quote that I begin with here, Rosenblatt explains the "cyclic movements" forward and backward in our progress toward a more democratic educational system. While the CCSS pose definite problems in the interpretive freedom of our teachers and their students, perhaps we can still move toward "the education of people for a democratic way of life" (Rosenblatt, preface).

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Amanda Stearns-Pfeiffer recently accepted a position as Assistant Professor of English at Oakland University, beginning in fall 2013. Her current research interests include the Common Core Standards (their implementation, consequences, and challenges), effective professional development models for teachers, and preparing pre-service English teachers for successful internship experiences.