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ADOPTING A CRITICAL INQUIRY APPROACH IN AN ENGLISH CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

Standards-based curriculum, an increasing part of school reform efforts since the 1980s, is informed by a variety of approaches. English language arts teachers need to understand these approaches and how to implement the Common Core Standards (2010) in the light of the best thinking and research on the teaching of English. While drawing on the whole repertoire of approaches and theories, this book especially emphasizes a critical inquiry approach, an approach we believe will make implementing the CCSS effective and meaningful.

At the same time, this chapter, like the rest of the book, will critically inquire into the CCSS themselves. So, while we explore the possibilities of the CCSS for fostering outstanding English teaching and learning, we will also ask questions such as: Where did the CCSS come from? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Are there ways that the standards might limit or constrain good teaching? How are CCSS typically implemented? How *should* they be implemented to maximize student learning and success?

Beliefs About Teaching English Language Arts

How you and others interpret and implement the CCSS depends on your basic beliefs about teaching English language arts. Beginning teachers sometimes assume that the most important skills to acquire from methods courses, professional preparation, and in-service workshops are specific techniques or teaching methods—the famed "silver bullets" guaranteed to ensure the learning of all students with whatever content at any time and place. Yet, as experienced teachers know, teaching with high standards requires complex, informed, and carefully situated professional knowledge.

As an English teacher, you draw on various theories and curricular frameworks every day as you develop your instructional goals and plans. For example, in teaching a literary text you make more or less conscious decisions about whether to focus on teaching the form of the short story, play, novel, or poem; emphasizing literary terms; teaching author biography, literary history, and movements; focusing on reading comprehension skills; modeling interpretative strategies; focusing on students' prior knowledge and differing interpretations; addressing characters, historical content, cultural issues, or political questions; and so on.

Thus, a crucial starting point for understanding the teaching of English is some background on the evolving philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the language arts curricula that you

Focus of ELA Curriculum Frameworks	*Instructional Goals*
Privileged cultural knowledge	Acquiring knowledge about and valuing certain literary texts
Knowledge of literary and rhetorical forms	Analyzing the organization and techniques employed in texts
Skills, processes, and procedures	Employing skills, processes, and procedures for comprehending and creating texts
Critical inquiry	Fostering critical analysis of texts and events from different perspectives, leading to change in thinking and action

Figure 2.1 Frameworks/Curriculum Focus

will encounter in secondary schools, in textbooks, in curriculum guides, and from colleagues. This knowledge can help you develop a self-aware approach, one in which you make choices about content knowledge and best teaching. What is, and what should be, English language arts? How will students learn best in my classroom?

Having a clearly defined set of beliefs about teaching English will help you justify your use of innovative curriculum and instruction in your student teaching and in your own classroom. You may then be less likely to simply conform to the traditional teaching practices operating in the schools than those teachers who do not have a well-defined set of beliefs and attitudes (Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004).

As summarized in Figure 2.1, we examine four different ELA curriculum frameworks that each employ certain instructional methods consistent with the goals of those frameworks.

English Language Arts as Privileged Cultural Knowledge

Bob (a prototypical fictional English teacher) has an enthusiasm for great literature. He teaches 12th grade British Literature and hits all the classics "from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf," as he puts it. His Freshman Language Arts classes linger on *The Odyssey*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Great Expectations*, all taught in full text, not in excerpts from a textbook. He wants students to be "culturally literate"—and acquainting them with "their heritage," with the classics and canonical authors, as the very purpose of high school English teaching, as Bob sees it.

Bob's familiar approach stresses English language arts as cultural knowledge acquired largely through literature deemed essential by textbooks or tradition. This curricular framework assumes that the core of English language arts is the acquisition of cultural knowledge. This approach was much debated during the "culture wars" of the 1980s when traditionalists armed with Ed Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1987) and Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987) argued that knowledge of a specific set of texts is needed to participate in society.

Certainly there is much to gained from the study of the "Great Books," yet this model takes for granted that particular texts cherished by certain groups—often those of White, Western, upper-middle-class people—should be considered as more essential for "cultural literacy" than those of other groups. Moreover, literary canons have always been in flux. Given the long history of education, the use of English or American literature as the content for school curriculum is relatively recent. To maintain its authority over India in the mid-19th century, the British government, rather than resort to the use of only military control, developed a British literature curriculum designed to subtly impose British/Christian values and provide examples of virtuous Englishmen to the religiously diverse people of India exploited by English colonizers. This curriculum was, in

fact, the first time English literature was used as school curriculum anywhere in the world (Viswanathan, 1989).

This model of English language arts as shared cultural content privileged by a certain community or society fails to recognize the range of different communities that each value different norms and practices associated with literacy learning. For example, while Hirsch (1987) posits that all students should be familiar with certain classic works of American literature, it is also the case that his proposed list excludes much women's literature, multicultural literature, young adult literature, working class literature, film, graphic novels/comics, rap songs, and digital literature—literature that is valued by different cultural communities. Hirsch's cultural literacy model also privileges acquisition of specific and isolated bits of information about literature as opposed to acquiring rich and contextualized knowledge or skills of critique and critical inquiry. Especially given the dramatically more culturally diverse school populations of America in the 21st century, a cultural knowledge/literacy model that ignores the prior knowledge, experience, and linguistic richness that American students bring to the classroom is problematic (Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, & Stuczynski, 2011).

As an activity in critical inquiry, students could examine how their own textbooks present the "literary canon." Comparing their textbooks with texts from different time periods or with alternative textbooks with specific focuses—such as Holt, Rinehart, and Winston's *African American Literature* textbook (1998), created for the Detroit public schools—may be illuminating. Many resources can be found online, including older textbooks, tables of contents, literary histories, and whole texts in digital archives. Given the diversity of both traditional and new texts available online, you and/or your students can now construct your own textbooks, and students can be writing about what they learn from the process.

A "cultural literacy" approach found in many state standards before the Common Core was developed meant that specific content or texts needed to be taught. This approach risks a transmission or "telling" model of instruction, what Freire (1968) defined as "the banking model" of education in which

> "the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (53)—deposits of information made by the teacher into the student. The opposite model (showing, if you will), is a model of inquiry, where learners are free to ask, explore, experiment. "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention," Freire writes, "through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other." (53) To "tell" is to rob the learner of her capacity for inquiry.
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> (Morris, 2015, p. 1)

In contrast to privileging certain texts as exemplars of the literary canon (Hirsch, 1987), the standards intentionally avoid prescribing specific texts that must be covered.

CRITICAL INQUIRY QUESTION

While this is true about the CCSS, it makes me question why schools are still prescribing teachers to teach a certain literary canon, a canon that reflects exactly what you describe—the "classics." This can be confusing, especially for new teachers. We must follow school curriculum, pacing calendars, protocols, etc., while simultaneously implementing the standards that seem to contradict the very reality of what is going on in school?

Pace University student Clara Owen

Following the CCSS means that there are no required texts that all students will be tested on. The CCSS do include a list of "Exemplars of Reading Text Complexity, Quality, and Range" (Appendix B) though these texts "expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list" (Appendix B, p. 2). The CCSS stress that "texts need to be selected around topics or themes that generate knowledge and allow students to study those topics or themes in depth" (CCSS, p. 58). (We discuss selecting literature for meaningful topic and thematic analysis in Chapter 5).

Because students in the past were often given less demanding texts based on assumptions about their "reading level," we believe that students certainly need to know how to read and understand more challenging "complex texts," a key focus of the reading/literature CCSS. At the same time, it is equally important that the texts and themes you chose are engaging and relevant. Some canonical texts may require knowledge or "cultural capital" that is not available to your students. Additionally, it is important to remember that there are many kinds of "text complexity" that students need to experience, not only complexity of language structures, but also complexity of plot and character as well as complexity in the portrayal of historical and cultural contexts.

In this book we are not calling for eliminating canonical works. Instead, in developing curriculum, we believe you need to move beyond limited ideas of the canon and the CCSS list of exemplar works to select texts and materials that will be engaging to your students based on their particular cultural backgrounds and interests, and based on the inquiry questions that guide your instruction. Every class you teach also has significant variation in reading background and ability. As a teacher you will want to attend to your students' backgrounds and prior knowledge, with the goal of supporting them as they extend to new ideas and information.

English Language Arts as Knowledge of Literary and Rhetorical Forms

A highly organized English teacher, Phyllis (another fictional prototypical English teacher), is fascinated by the structures of texts. Her students learn about the forms of literature and writing. Her literature curriculum moves sequentially from the elements of the short story, to different forms of poetry, to features of drama, to the structure of the novel. Phyllis's students also memorize different literary terms, from *allusion* to *symbol*. When she teaches writing, her class is broken into units by different formal categories, or "rhetorical modes": the argumentative essay, the expository essay, the description paper, comparison and contrast, the personal narrative—the only paper where "I" is allowed, Phyllis makes clear—the literary analysis paper, the research paper, etc.

Phyllis's approach is called *formalism* and it was the dominant approach to teaching English beginning in the late 1940s. Even today English language arts textbooks both for literature and for composition are often organized around learning specific literary forms. Yet we believe that an overemphasis on forms, structures, and terms can deprive students of the subjective experiences associated with responding to and creating texts.

Questions of content, context, and audience, what the literature is about, what it means to the reader, how writing works in the real world—questions that matter and that engage students—fall to the wayside in a formalist approach to English teaching. Drawing on narrow traditions of literary scholarship and a limited understanding of the approach of the "New Critics," this kind of curriculum appeals to textbook companies because potentially complicated or controversial questions don't get in the way of their books being adopted by states and school districts. This formalist curriculum also appeals to the testing industry because, say, the form of a sonnet, the difference between a metaphor and a simile, or the formal components of a research paper is isolatable knowledge that can be "reliably" tested by multiple-choice questions.

As we will explore in this book, to a significant degree, a number of the CCSS reflect a formalist approach to English language arts. With regard to writing instruction, the CCSS writing

standards are organized around the modes of argumentative, explanatory, informational, and narrative writing. Likewise, the literature standards are organized by study of types of figurative language in poetry and narrative structure. Within the standards for analysis of "craft and structure" of literary texts, students are expected to be able to "analyze how an author structures a text, orders events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulates time (e.g., pacing) to create mystery, tension, or surprise." Finally, the speaking/listening standards are organized according to different ways of communicating in discussions or through use of media.

As we have suggested, one possible explanation for the formalist orientation of the standards is that it lends itself more readily to standardized testing and scoring of students' writing. In addition to multiple-choice questions, open-ended assessment items on the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments, students' writing may be graded by computers. Without attending to the content, the strength of an argument, or the quality of language, a computer may be able to identify a student's use of certain writing conventions or forms. Formalist literary analysis can be recognized, perhaps even by a computer reading student essays, when a student names a specific literary term or, in writing argumentative essays, formulates a position statement with supporting reasons or counterarguments.

The key to instruction in reading or writing is to focus on what meaning can be made of the diverse texts under consideration, and then to examine how the form of the text works in service of that meaning. Students can study forms both through reading and viewing various texts and visual materials and by constructing their own writing and oral presentations. For example, students might examine how mystery writers deliberately withhold information about certain crimes or plant "red herring" clues designed to challenge readers. Or students can listen to oral narratives and identify language designed to heighten the unusual, extraordinary nature of the event, adding to what William Labov (1972) defines as a story's "tellability." Then, they can write their own mystery stories or share heightened oral narratives building on knowledge of these important strategies that characterize different literary forms. One of the sample PARCC CCSS assessment items for 11th grade includes a narrative writing task based on reading Nikolai Gogol's 1842 short story "Akakiy Akakievitch's New Cloak" that entails understanding the use of details to portray a character's perspective:

> Near the middle of paragraph 2, the author describes a "young man, a newcomer" who shows sympathy for Akakiy. Write an imagined journal entry from the young man's point of view as he reflects back on the situation later in life and the effects it has had on his life. Use what you have read in the passage to provide specific details relevant to the young man and Akakiy.
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> (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2015, p. 41)

Our emphasis will always be on the engagement with and the production of ideas based on some actual purpose for reading or writing. In this relevant context of a critical inquiry approach where questions and ideas matter, learning about forms then does not become an end in itself but rather is a means to enhance reading and writing in meaningful ways.

English Language Arts as Literacy Skills, Strategies, or Processes

In the middle school across the street from Bob and Phyllis, Anna and Ward (two other fictional prototypical English teachers) carry on their own debate about how to teach English. Ward's mantra is "skills, skills, skills."

In Ward's class, instruction is organized around the teacher modeling a reading or writing skill, the students practicing the skill first under Ward's guidance, and then completing homework

handouts and worksheets independently. Ward views reading and writing as a set of skills or strategies that can be transported from one text or context to almost any other. Ward has separate reading lessons on breaking words down into syllables, identifying word roots, using context clues, previewing, predicting, skimming, scanning, paraphrasing, identifying main ideas, etc.

When it is time for writing, Ward's students learn rules for spelling, capitalization, and punctuation; the differences between different noun cases (subjective, objective, possessive); forming perfect tenses; using correlative conjunctions; reflexive and intensive pronouns; phrases and clauses; misplaced and dangling modifiers; the function of verbals (gerunds, participles, infinitives); aligning case and number; using verbs in the indicative, imperative, interrogative, conditional, and subjunctive moods—and more.

In the lunch room Anna tells Ward that his approach could also be called "skill, drill . . . and kill."

"Where is the life in your teaching? Where is a sense of personal involvement?"

Responding to Anna, Ward (correctly) points out, "Hey all of these skills are specifically listed in the CCSS for middle school English! These are just the things that they are going to test! And now that our evaluations as teacher are tied to student test scores you are taking a risk if you ignore student skills!"

If Ward's mantra is "skills, skills, skills," Anna's is "process, process, process." Anna believes that writing and reading are interactive as students create and work with their own texts and develop their own interpretations of their reading. In Anna's classroom students learn and practice the steps of "the writing process"—prewriting, organizing, revising, editing, and publishing. Drawing on Nancie Atwell (1987, 1988), Anna calls her classroom a "workshop" where students write about topics that matter to them. Anna also sees reading, like writing, as a continuous and recursive process of developing meaning. Students bring their prior knowledge to reading, and the meaning of the text emerges as a transaction between what the students already know and the words on the page. Anna believes meaning evolves as students discuss the text with each other and the teacher, and return to the text for rereading and to find new understandings.

"My students are doing lots more reading and writing than your students. All their reading and writing are going to better prepare them to pass whatever tests the state throws at them," Anna tells Ward. "And besides, I want them to become readers and writers for a lifetime!"

In the 1980s and 1990s skill and process models of English teaching were seen as at war with each other. Extensive research on teaching traditional school grammar showed acquiring the skill of naming parts of speech had no impact on improving writing (Hillocks, 1984). The process model emerged to emphasize students writing and teachers supporting that writing at different phases of the composing process. In the process model skills were to be taught "in context"; rather than having the whole class learn about, say, noun–verb agreement, that "skill" is taught only to those students whose actual writing shows that they need to learn it. In that sense, the process model does offer significant advances over a purely skill-based approach.

With regard to reading instruction, based on cognitive strategy models of reading comprehension, teachers would organize daily lessons around teaching a particular strategy—inferring the main idea, applying prior knowledge, predicting, etc.—in ways that emphasized use of the strategy more than focused, close reading of a text.

As a result, these skills, processes, or strategies were then often taught in isolation for their own sake. Maren Aukerman (2013) describes this as "pedagogy as procedures" where the teacher is primarily concerned with the students employing certain processes or strategies in particular ways consistent with the teacher's instruction. While it is important that students have a metacognitive sense of the processes or strategies that are important, the problem is that, as with a formalist approach, conforming to use of a certain procedure or strategy can become an end in itself rather than use of a process or strategy as tools to achieve certain goals.

One limitation of mimicking use of these skills, processes, or strategies is that they became ends rather than means to engaging in what Aukerman (2013) describes as "pedagogy as sense-making" through dialogic exploration of alternative meaning of experiences and texts. Focusing primarily on "inferring the main point" of a text as itself the primary goal of a strategy lesson, while not unimportant, can limit the extent to which students explore alternative meanings of a text. Rather than having to conform to their teachers' experience that they employ certain processes or strategies in certain predetermined ways, a "pedagogy as sense-making" invites students to engage in dialogic talk and writing in unpredictable, unfolding "events-in-the-making" (Roth, 2014). A seemingly "off-task" classroom discussion of a novel may result in students sharing unique insights about the novel that their teacher never anticipated would occur.

The critical inquiry approach we put forward in this book is not intended to negate students' use of skills, processes, or strategies. You need to be aware of the skills, processes, or strategies that students are employing or lacking, but not make them the end goals of instruction.

Adoption of certain skills, processes, or strategies decontextualized models of instruction fails to account for the social and cultural contexts shaping the complexities of literacy learning. It is therefore difficult to codify a set curriculum sequence or hierarchy for teaching these skills, processes, or strategies as distinct from students' participation in social or cultural contexts.

Another limitation of the CCSS is that they presuppose that certain skills, processes, or strategies serve as necessary prerequisites for other skills, processes, or strategies. However, just because a student might have met in seventh grade the Common Core standard of learning to "choose among simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences to signal differing relationships among ideas" doesn't mean that the student won't be making such choices again at different grade levels. The acquisition of literacy is complex, recursive, and highly individual, and it cannot be easily codified according to set sequences or prerequisites given that every English class has students with a wide range of abilities and different levels of engagement.

ACTIVITY: RECOLLECTION OF YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES WITH DIFFERENT CURRICULUM MODELS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Think back over your English language arts experiences as a student and recall which of these experiences were the most versus least engaging or productive. Then consider reasons for differences in your experiences in terms of the influence of your teachers' adoption of the different curriculum models noted earlier. For example, to what degree did a focus on formalist analysis activities enhance or limit your engagement? How did your experience with activities associated with these curriculum models lead you to perceive the purpose or value of certain ways of learning—for example, the value of acquiring knowledge about classic works of literature?

Critical Inquiry as a Social Practice of Literacy Acquisition

In contrast to the previously described curriculum models, in this book, we propose a social practices curriculum model supporting use of a critical inquiry approach to learning. A social practices curriculum model posits that through activities, students employ and acquire practices essential to operating in social contexts the content of learning—what the reading and writing are about—is

put at the center. Student engage in questions about topics that matter in their lives and in the world, drawing on a wide range of materials and texts. Students read and write in different forms that are dependent on the relevance of those forms to what they are learning. Skills and processes are integrated, as needed, organically into a study that is otherwise meaningful and that is, in practice, engaged with social realities.

Recent social theories of learning maintain that literacy skills emerge through relationships between people and how we construct our identities in the context of social activity. Alastair Pennycook (2010) defines social practices as "bundles of activities that are organized into coherent ways of doing things" (p. 25). This focus on activity reverses traditional literacy learning that presupposes that students need to first acquire competency in language, grammar, rhetorical structures, genres, or literary forms prior to effectively engaging in writing or reading.

Instead, the current thinking is that the focus should be on the social aspects of learning—how *through* and *because* of participation in literacy activities as social phenomena students are acquiring language, genres, discourses, and tools (Pennycook, 2010). Thus, the notion that one teaches students to "read" or to "write" as generalized sets of skills ignores the variations in how "reading" and "writing" are employed in different ways in different kinds of social contexts (Street, 1995). For example, reading a text involves making those inferences most relevant to a certain social purpose and context. You read your peer's text message based on how you will respond to that message. Similarly, writing and producing texts requires complex social understandings of purposes, audiences, and contexts. For instance, writing rap lyrics to perform to a group of peers involves quite different social practices than writing a legal brief for use in a court case.

A critical inquiry perspective on English language arts focuses not only on the social, but also on how use of social practices is shaped by certain cultural, economic, or political institutional forces (Street, 1995). From an ideological perspective, evaluations of students lacking specific school-based skills because of "deficits" in their home cultures presupposes that literacy use in the classroom differs from or is superior to literacy uses in the home. In contrast, a focus on building on students' cultural "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 2001) values the literacies and cultural background students bring from their home cultures—their literacies and cultural backgrounds can thus be perceived not in deficit terms but rather as knowledge to build on in the school culture (Janks, 2014).

CRITICAL INQUIRY COMMENT

At the school I teach at in the Bronx, I learn so much from the different cultures, backgrounds, and dialects of my students. Their stories and cadences enrich our collected experience, and I always try to draw off these experiences in order that we may build from our own "funds of knowledge." I find that their own language—how they speak at home and on the street—can be just as poetic or academic as any formal article or text.

Pace University student Joshua Alan Dick

Similarly, a critical inquiry approach goes beyond the speaking/listening and language standards' focus on language use based on adherence to appropriate norms for discussions or standard English grammar and usage to focus on the cultural or ideological uses of oral or written language, for example, how language serves to construct power relationships between speakers and audience or reflects certain ideological ways of knowing and thinking (Luke, 2012). All of these questions and approaches to English language arts curriculum can, of course, be generative topics for critical inquiries.

Arthur Applebee (2013, p. 32) identifies a key component of a critical inquiry curriculum as engaging in: "curricular conversations [that] require topics worth talking about, appropriate background or specialized knowledge, and an ability to take positions, make arguments, and evaluate evidence in ways appropriate to the discipline."

Applebee cites an example of a ninth grade unit on *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1993) devised by Jim Burke (pp. 130–153) associated with the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (p. 130). The unit begins with providing students with historical information about the Great Depression and images of California's Salinas Valley. Based on responses to the novel, students work towards discussions or and writing narrative essays about "allies in our lives" (p. 145) based on responding to other texts such as Obama's 2004 address to the Democratic National Convention, connections addressing the CCSS of making connections between texts, and adopting multiple perspectives.

Our critical inquiry framework as described in Chapter 1 for use in implementing the CCSS shifts from defining English language arts as specific content—knowing *about* literature, language, composition, or media—to a social practice model that focuses on what one *does through* engagement in texts and activities to engage in critical inquiry (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008) or what Applebee (1996) defines as "knowledge-in-action."

This social practice model of learning suggests the importance of creating classroom activities in which students are engaged in activities through which they acquire these social practices, particularly the social practice of critical inquiry. It is through active participation in these activities of discussing, writing, and producing texts that students gain experience in using these practices to achieve certain purposes. Working together in small groups to craft letters about an issue that concerns them to submit their town's local newspaper entails use of the practices of formulating rhetorical purposes, collaboratively brainstorming and generating ideas, formulating arguments, and revising/editing texts. For more on these different ELA curriculum models, see "LRA Curriculum Models" on our website (englishccss.pbworks.com).

Use of Digital/Media Literacies

One important recent development in teaching English language learning has to do with the increased use of digital and media literacies associated with the increased use of digital tools in the classroom. In the United States, 80% of grades 9–12 and 65% of grades 6–8 students have access to a smartphone while 45% of grades 9–12 and 52% of grades 6–8 students have access to a tablet (Devaney, 2014), with 75% of high school students reporting that they use smartphones regularly in the classroom and 89% positing that use of tablets enhances their engagement with learning (Harris Poll, 2014).

Rather than perceiving this as simply a matter of increased use of technology by young people, this increasing use of digital tools is resulting in a transformation of learning. For example, the fact that students can readily access or share information within and outside the classroom enhances what is defined as "connected learning" that is based on students' own interests, social interactions, and passions related to what they want to learn (Ito et al., 2013). Rather than simply focusing on use of technology as the goal of instruction, this transformation needs to place the learner at the center of learning networks, and these networks need to be connected in ways that support student learning and the questions they are inquiring into (Aspen Institute Task Force on Learning and the Internet, 2014).

Reading and writing have always been, and are increasingly, collaborative acts. Creating effective "affinity spaces" (Gee & Hayes, 2011) in the classroom involves more than specific tasks or activities and includes finding ways to tap into and exploit students' knowledge, experiences, and passions in ways that help them commit to shared investigations and goals.

The new media is social and calls for collaborative learning where students assist and mentor each other, given their shared commitments. For example, 66 eleventh grade students in a Philadelphia high school created their own online teen magazine based on topics of interest to a peer audience related to art, music, food, schoolwork, and so on (Rami, 2012). Based on their own interests and expertise, they focused on producing images, writing, layout, cover design, editing, etc., so they were working collaboratively as an "affinity group" (Gee & Hayes, 2011). Because they were writing for an online audience—receiving 2,000 hits when the magazine went online—students had a sense of purpose and an audience to consider in determining how and why they were engaging their readers. As one student noted: "I was never much for English and definitely not much for writing. But with the magazine, I began to write about things that I really care about. Through the magazine I had to write, I had to do a lot of research to make sure what I was writing was accurate. I also gained skills in editing, which would serve me greatly in my future."

The Common Core State Standards and the Standards Movement

The CCSS have now been adopted by most states, though even, at the time of this Second Edition (2016), these states are still trying to figure out how to assess student learning, and school districts, schools, and teachers are still stumbling over how the CCSS should be implemented.

The adoption of the CCSS builds on different "standards-based" reform efforts that began in the 1980s. President George Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation required individual states to set standards. However, governors became concerned that different state standards and different ways that those standards were assessed made it appear that some states were doing a better educational job than others. Moreover, after years of the NCLB approach, there were still many high school students who lacked the abilities and skills associated with success in college, a problem particularly acute in lower-income communities where people of color are overrepresented.

The CCSS were initiated by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, working with Achieve, Inc., the American College Testing Program (ACT), publishing/testing companies, and 16 education associations in the Learning First Alliance. States then adopted the standards in order to apply for funding from President Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" educational grant initiatives in 2010. The hope of the CCSS was that, once again, education would be improved by issuing standards, this time based on a more consistent set of goals across states.

Contrary to widespread political opposition to the CCSS, public opinion supports the idea of national standards to enhance the quality of instruction. One survey found that 85% of those surveyed voiced support for consistent standards to enhance learning expectations and 97% posited the need for students to engage in critical thinking and application of that thinking to lived-world problems (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2015).

We believe that English language arts teachers can view the adoption of the CCSS as an opportunity to generate innovative, engaging curriculum that will enhance instruction in our discipline, raise intellectual aspirations for all students, and, to the extent possible, improve the public's regard for schools.

ACTIVITY: MAKING GROUP PRESENTATIONS ABOUT IMPLEMENTING THE CCSS

Prepare a presentation to the class on one of the following topics or questions assigned to your group. Include the standard or the language that you are discussing.

- Select one or two anchor (non–grade level) standards and describe how you would implement these standards based on adoption of the critical inquiry framework described in Chapter 1.
- Compare and contrast an anchor standard with several related specific standards. Some schools emphasize only specific grade-level standards; some experts recommend focusing only on anchor standards. What is gained or lost by either approach? Talk about the advantages and disadvantages of focusing either on anchor or grade level standards citing specifics from the anchor standard you chose.
- Identify three anchor standards that you believe are important for students to achieve, provide reasons for their importance, and how you would implement them.
- Identify a standard that you believe would be difficult for a particular group of students to achieve, giving reasons why that standard would be difficult. Then, propose some activities designed to help students address these potential difficulties.
- Identify a learning progression between at least three different grade levels and talk about what you like and don't like about that learning progression. Drawing on your specific example, and your reading of other learning progressions, how would you judge the effectiveness of the learning progressions in the CCSS in general?
- Review the texts listed as exemplars in CCSS Appendix B. Assess what you believe would be the potential appeal/understanding or lack of appeal/understanding for these exemplars relative to certain groups of students, noting reasons for assessments.

Limitations of the CCSS

As we have suggested and will continue to explore throughout this book, there are a number of limitations associated with adoption of the CCSS. It is natural that a book about a critical inquiry approach to teaching the CCSS should also critically inquire into those standards themselves.

It is useful to recognize that the introduction of the CCSS in 2010 occurred in the midst of a larger school reform push related to the failures of NCLB, the adoption of testing to evaluate teachers, the push for market-based privatization of schooling through charters, challenges to teacher unions and tenure, reduction of school funding, increases in child poverty rates, increases in college costs and debt that affect teachers' debt burden, and an economy that was and is slow to recover from the Great Recession (Karp, 2013–2014). These factors have placed additional burdens on teachers, who may then also need to adopt relatively quickly to implementing the CCSS, resulting in their resistance for doing so. As Stan Karp (2013–2014) noted:

> The way the standards are being rushed into classrooms across the country is further undercutting their credibility. These standards have never been fully implemented in real schools anywhere. They're more or less abstract descriptions of academic abilities organized into sequences by people who have never taught at all or who have not taught this particular set of standards. To have any impact, the standards must be translated into curriculum, instructional plans, classroom materials, and valid assessments. A reasonable approach to implementing new standards would include a few multi-year pilot programs that provided time, resources, opportunities for collaboration, and transparent evaluation plans.
>
> (p. 5)

While more teachers are receiving some kind of training in CCSS implementation, still less than half of these teachers in one national survey perceive this training as effective (Editorial Projects in Education, 2013). One reason for teacher resistance to the CCSS is that teachers notice that many of the same forces promoting privatization, charter schools, and increased testing are also at work in formulating and promoting the CCSS. These standards are derived not from educators or teacher unions or their professional organizations, but from a coalition of state governors, foundations, entrepreneurs, testing companies, and businesses identified by Jory Brass (2014) as

> policy entrepreneurs (e.g., Student Achievement Partners), venture philanthropy (e.g., Gates Foundation, Pearson Foundation, GE Foundation), neoconservative think tanks (Fordham Foundation), corporate executives (e.g., Business Roundtable), and non-governmental trade organizations (Achieve, Inc., National Governors Association) in "partnership" or "consortia" with education publishers (e.g., Pearson Corporation, McGraw-Hill) and standardized testing companies (Education Testing Service, ACT, College Board).
>
> (p. 126)

There was only one teacher on the initial group drafting the CCSS; one of the lead writers on that group, David Coleman, now head of the College Board, has never been a teacher. Having these groups and not educators develop the CCSS meant that they framed school reform in terms of a neoliberal discourse of business management that values "competition" and "accountability" through "measurable outcomes" including standardized testing as well as privatization of public education (Brass, 2014). Such "reform" creates the need for purchase of new "Common Core–compatible" textbooks, scripted curricula, online curriculum materials, and tests financially benefitting publishing and testing companies such as Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt, the Education Testing Service (ETS), and ACT.

Standardization of Instruction

Although this book will argue that the CCSS can be interpreted in productive ways that enhance students' literacy learning, adopting a standards-based approach guiding instruction itself can result in the *standardization* of instruction. The CCSS recognize that standardization is not the same thing as *holding high standards*. The key to effective standards-based reform is in the implementation.

Precisely in order to achieve outstanding intellectual and academic accomplishment, the CCSS set general goals for student learning but they do not specify *what* or *how* to teach, as was often the case with NCLB state standards. There is no "canon" or specific "privileged cultural knowledge" prescribed. Indeed, the CCSS do not create a common, core, required, or national curriculum of any kind. As the Introduction to the CCSS makes clear,

> A great deal is left to the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers. The aim of the Standards is to articulate the fundamentals, not to set out an exhaustive list or a set of restrictions that limits what can be taught beyond what is specified herein. (p. 2)

As Rebecca Sipe (2009) notes, "standards provide a definition of what is possible, but *standards are not curriculum documents*" (p. 41)—nor do they specify, describe, or set forward any general or specific teaching methods. It is teachers as "knowledgeable and engaged professionals [who] are the most important factor in the improvement of adolescent literacy" (p. 41). So, if the standards are properly implemented, it should be significantly up to you as the teacher, collaborating with your colleagues and districts, to develop the curriculum and teaching approaches you will use.

Yet, there is a long-standing, historical tension in educational reform efforts between top-down standardization versus a bottom-up focus on the local classroom context and unique student needs:

> On one side are administrative reformers that have consistently argued that the primary goal of schooling is a uniform structure in the mold of Taylor-style [assembly line] industrialism. On the other side are the pedagogical reformers who proffer that schools should recognize and adapt to the individual capacities and interests of students rather than systemic standardization—a position that aligns more closely with John Dewey's socio-constructivist conception of teaching and learning.
>
> (Schneider, 2014, p. 16)

The needs, abilities, knowledge base and interests of teachers and students vary from school to school, from classroom to classroom, and even within every classroom; they cannot be standardized. Much of the resistance to top-down, bureaucratic imposition of standards has derived from teachers who value a bottom-up focus on their own unique, local school cultural context and particular students' needs, interest, and knowledge. Enforcing the same learning on all students, as some have mistakenly advocated on the basis of "standards," slows down the most capable students and leaves behind those already struggling, creates inappropriate limitations on what students can accomplish, and in effect, dumbs down teaching and learning. As Christopher Tienken (2008, p. 61) notes:

> Standardization is a Pollyanna approach to policy making. One cannot simply separate curriculum from culture, emotions, personal backgrounds, prior experiences, prior knowledge, and stages of cognitive and social development. . . . Mandating that everyone follow the same set of standards and perform at the same level of achievement guarantees that everyone will not get what they need and that certain groups of students, those that do not fit into the new system, will lose out. These latter students will be labeled "not proficient" or "in need" of academic remediation, when perhaps they just need more choices, more pathways, and more diversity of curricula within the system.

As was the case with the NCLB state standards, having to address a myriad of different standards resulted in fragmented curriculum organized around addressing isolated standards as opposed to an integrated, well-balanced, curriculum that builds increasingly sophisticated connections and understandings between units. For example, teachers were told to list a specific "standard for the day," on the board and then to teach just to that standard, leading to standards-based grading in which teachers check off that students have "achieved" a standard.

Attempting to address individual standards in isolation shifts the goal of your teaching from fostering engaging learning that addresses the complexity of participation in any language arts activity, to an intellectually impoverished isolation of skills and knowledge in the name of "meeting a standard." As the Introduction to the CCSS specifically states,

> While the Standards delineate specific expectations in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language, each standard need not be a separate focus for instruction and assessment. Often, several standards can be addressed by a single rich task. (p. 5)

Advocates for adopting a standards-based approach argue that standards enhance student achievement. However, there is also no strong evidence indicating that adopting standards will necessarily improve student achievement. For instance, there is no strong correlation between National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores and high state standards (Mathis, 2011). There is also no strong correlation between international test performance and countries with national standards (Tienken, 2008). Countries such as the Nordic countries or Canada have no national standards but their students score well in international reading tests (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007). Likewise, research suggests that standards may have negative effects on non-White students' performance and dropout rates (Mathis, 2011).

When the CCSS are misinterpreted or perverted and become a rote standardization of learning the curriculum will also likely emphasize the need for individual students to achieve standards on their own. This presupposes that literacy learning is a solo, isolated effort as opposed to a situated, social activity essential to critical inquiry. As Avila and Moore (2012, p. 54) note:

> Doing critical literacies, with standards in mind, will always be a tense process because critical literacies often operate from a sociocultural definition of literacy while standards define literacy proficiency in individual students (Luke, 2000, p. 459); their agendas are divergent, and, some might say, mutually exclusive.

Standardization of instruction in decontextualized, prescriptive ways is often promoted by certain organizations or publishers as a means to sell curriculum materials or textbooks. As Moore, Zancanella, and Avila (2014, p. 143) note, these organizations are attempting to define how the CCSS should be implemented in a manner that is

> anathema to the spirit and methods of critical literacy. To put it another way, the CCSS say "This is what literacy is. Use it this way." Critical literacy asks, "What is literacy for me, for us, for this community, this time, in this place, and how can it be used by all of us to reach our goals?"

Standardization may also lower rather than raise achievement if teachers teach the same content using the same methods regardless of differences in their classroom contexts or students (Kohn, 2010). Such homogenization often occurs when schools or districts adopt "teacher-proof," scripted curriculum programs or mandated textbook series that allow for little teacher development of their own curriculum.

Narrow textbooks, prepackaged or scripted curricula, mass-marketed worksheets, and one-size-fits-all-teaching or curriculum implementation do not and will not fulfill the high expectations of school reform that all of us want and that, taken at their best, the CCSS envision. Conceptions of English language arts that are out of date and are uninformed about advances in the content of our field, evolving literary canons, emerging literary and social science scholarship, and changing literacy demands in the digital age are not appropriate to the high stakes and progressive vision of school improvement intended by these standards. Informed administrators and curriculum specialists understand this and work to support teacher professional knowledge, research, decision making, risk taking, and freedom to experiment, grow, and improve, year after year. For more on strengths and limitations of the CCSS, see "Strengths and Limitations of the CCSS" on our website (englishccss.pbworks.com).

EXAMINING MISPERCEPTIONS OF THE CCSS

Teachers may implement the CCSS based on misinterpretations of the CCSS listed here. Based on discussions of one or more of these approaches, explain why such a misinterpretation may have occurred and why this approach might be limited, ineffective, or ill advised. Then, formulate some alternative approaches that would be richer or better than these approaches. Finally, describe what you could do if, in a school setting, you were told that you needed to follow one or more of these approaches.

ELA teachers:

- Must teach only text dependent "close reading."
- Must teach all students at the same grade level the same material at the same time.
- Have to follow a scripted "teacher proof" instructional plan.
- Are required to teach one standard per day, every day, always a different standard.
- Are required keep a gradebook that separately grades every student on every standard.
- Are required to teach long units, or even full semesters, focused on test-taking skills.
- Are required to teach only standards for a given grade level.
- Are told they can only teach from the approved textbook.
- Are told that they can only teach texts from the CCSS list of text exemplars.
- Are support personnel in a computer lab where students systematically work through an entirely online curriculum to meet CCSS.

Limitations of Standardized Assessments and Teacher Evaluation

One major challenge facing the CCSS implementation is that is it occurring at the same time as the increased use of test scores for assessing teachers' effectiveness as determined by changes in their students' average test scores over the period of a year. These "value-added" policies for basing evaluation of teachers based on their students' test scores were promoted at the state level as well as by Race to the Top federal funding that required such testing along with adoption of the CCSS (Fairbanks, 2014). For example, beginning in 2012 in New York State, 20% of teachers' evaluations are based on local test scores and 20% on changes in students' scores on standardized state tests. This means that in addition to administrators' classroom evaluations, 40% of a teacher's evaluations are based on test scores leading to ratings of highly effective, effective, developing, or ineffective. For one year, a teacher's students may achieve high scores, resulting in that teacher being rated as effective or highly effective, but that same teacher's students the following year may have lower scores simply given differences in the nature of those students, particularly for teachers with students from low-income families. This was particularly a problem for teachers in New York where the state tests employed in 2013–2014 were themselves more difficult than previous years, resulting in lower student test scores and therefore declines in teacher evaluations, although in the fall semester of 2014, 94% of New York teachers were still receiving highly effective or effective ratings (Fairbanks, 2014). These policies led teachers in Atlanta to alter tests so that their schools would not be penalized.

This increased focus on test scores to evaluate teachers presupposes a strong relationship between what is measured on a standardized test and what students are being taught or what they acquired in a teacher's classroom. However, results of items on standardized tests often may bear little relationship with what and how students are learning in a teacher's classroom, leading to perceptions of those tests as not valid or fair measures of a teacher's teaching ability, as well as leading to test-preparation instruction at the expense of the critical inquiry methods proposed in this book.

As of summer 2015, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in Congress included decoupling use of test scores for assessing teachers, as well as reducing the role of the federal government by providing individual states with more autonomy in implementing the CCSS. For links to individual states' CCSS sites, see "State Departments of Education CCSS Sites" on our website (englishccss.pbworks.com).

Standards and the Critical Inquiry Approach

While, for better and worse, the CCSS do draw on a variety of traditions in English teaching, there are a number of dimensions in the CCSS that are strongly supportive of the critical inquiry approach we advocate. The Introduction to the standards sets forward that they support an "integrated model of literacy" where reading, writing, speaking, and listening are blended together rather than treated as isolated skills or practices. The Introduction explains that

> To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new. (p. 1)

These positions are central to the critical inquiry approaches set forward in this book. The CCSS envision a strong emphasis on informational text that can be blended into language arts instruction. Informational text becomes more meaningful, when part of a critical inquiry approach that also includes a wide range of materials including literary text.

There has been confusion on the part of some administrators and teachers, however, when it comes to reading the table in the Introduction that establishes that by 12th grade 70% of reading should be "informational" and 30% literary. Take into consideration that it is clearly stated that these percentages are meant to be inclusive of all reading of informational texts in the 12th grade, *including texts in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. The 70% figure for informational text is for all of 12th grade taken together, not just for the English language arts class alone.

The CCSS on writing standards emphasize argumentative writing and require attention to audience, purpose, and rhetorical context. A recent study of the teaching of argumentative writing in 31 English language arts classrooms found that what counted as argument and effective argumentative writing varied from classroom to classroom, and in turn the types of activities the teachers and students engaged in varied, leading to different trajectories of writing development made available to the students (Newell, Bloome, & Hirvela, 2015). This focus on argumentative writing is a logical and natural part of a critical inquiry classroom. It builds on fostering argument in discussions in which students learn to formulate claims and supporting evidences in deliberative, respectful ways in "political classrooms" to address questions such as "how should we live together" (Hess & McAvoy, 2012).

Of course, "critical inquiry" can itself be standardized, though terms like "critical inquiry" and "critical literacy" are sometimes used in textbooks or curricular materials in ways that are not especially meaningful or authentic or in ways that trivialize questions of inquiry or reintroduce teacher-centered curriculum. As a result, students may end up engaging in "critical inquiry" based on the teacher's rather than their own terms. As Maren Aukerman (2012, p. 43) notes:

> These practices may paradoxically reify the notion that the teacher is the one with textual authority and, as a result, students continue to be enveloped in situations where they are obligated to try to read and understand the text just one way—as the teacher wants them to.

Analysis of instruction based on scripted steps for engaging in critical inquiry contained in an *Open Court* textbook and curriculum guide found that the teachers conformity to the scripted curriculum served to marginalize students' own input and engagement (Pandya, 2012). The teachers' conformity to the textbook and guide

> made students' difficult and out-of-bounds inquiries inappropriate through a combination of outright rejection of ideas and subtle maneuvering. The pressure to conform to the cycle, and to push students to do the same, drained the process of any potential for the development of critical literacy skills, as the teacher, and the students, were more interested in following directions than they were in asking questions of and about texts.
>
> (Pandya, 2012, p. 24)

Moving beyond a scripted or teacher-centered critical inquiry approach involves engaging students in dialogic, inclusive, and a wider range of competing perspectives and voices associated with addressing issues or problems (Aukerman, 2012). Rather than attempting to arrive at a consensus perspective, as an advocate of critical inquiry you are inviting students to express alternative, dialogic perspectives (Heidebrink-Bruno, 2014). In doing so, students recognize that texts are not neutral: they reflect their author's particular perspectives, discourses, or narrative and often serve to position the audience in limited ways (Janks, 2014, p. 2). When students' own perspectives are honored as valuable, just as those of the teacher or their peers are valuable, students become more confident about publicly voicing their critiques.

However, because these standards may be employed to support traditional formalist ways of learning, it is important that the standards be translated in terms of uses of digital/media to *build social relationships and connections*, and address learning to *critically analyze* the media and Internet resources. As Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2014, p. 175) note:

> No standards address functions of literacy such as reflection, personal growth, civic participation, social change, or the formulation of public identities in the technological and global environments of the Internet . . . literacy gets reduced to reading academic texts, some modern, but with more emphasis on 18th-, 19th-, and 20th century literature. Bomer and Maloch (2011) assert that "these standards argue that students go to school to learn how to go to school some more" (p. 40). The standards, they argue, advocate the reading of complex texts for the purposes of writing complex textual responses. What is emphasized is academic reading and writing rather than personal or critical response to reading and writing in the real world.

Fostering "connected learning" (Ito et al., 2013) involves adopting roles of social planner, facilitator, and co-learner that differ from the traditional teacher role of conveyor of knowledge. It entails learning about and building on your students' knowledge and expertise in planning activities so that they perceive themselves as valued members of the classroom affinity space. From this perspective the ELA curriculum goes beyond covering a body of knowledge to learning the literacy practices involved in operating in and contributing to these passionate affinity spaces.

Sometimes as a new or student teacher you face the challenge of operating in spaces and curricula over which you have little control. This requires a politically delicate balancing act of adopting status-quo spaces and curriculum while at the same time being willing to experiment with new ways of teaching ELA. For example, while you may be required to adopt your school's curriculum mandates tied to the CCSS, you can also develop innovative ways of teaching that curriculum by framing the construction of your classroom affinity space as itself part of the curriculum. You also

need to recognize that you can have a significant role in determining what reading, writing, speaking, listening, and media texts are taught in your classroom; what topics, issues, themes, and ideas you will cover; and what sequence will best achieve the CCSS. You will be in the best position to justify these choices if you are able to articulate choices based on beliefs about student learning. This book will aid you in sorting through those beliefs.

ACTIVITY: CONTEXTUALIZING THE CCSS: CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES ON THE CCSS

Adopting a critical inquiry approach involves recognizing conflicting perspectives on a problem or issue. It is certainly the case that there has been strong opposition to and heated debates about implementation of the CCSS. Based on reading material reflecting conflicting perspectives on the CCSS (located on our website), identify the pro–con arguments formulated by these groups:

- conservative politicians who perceive the CCSS as an imposition by "big government" on local schools, leading them to call for rejecting adoption of the CCSS in their states
- students and parents opposed to the PARCC and Smarter Balanced testing associated with standardized testing mandates derived from the NCLB testing mandates
- educators and employers who posit the need for more "rigorous" instruction related to potential success in college/workplace
- educators and policymakers opposed to standards as the imposition of a neoliberal, "accountability" agenda onto schools associated with standardization of instruction

Then, in a face-to-face or online role-playing activity in which a state board of education is holding a hearing as to whether their state should adopt, reject, or modify the CCSS, assume one of the roles described to testify to members of the state board of education, who themselves may have different perspectives on the CCSS. In your testimony, consider adopting a discourse consistent with the ways of knowing or attitudes constituting your role, for example, an education discourse of "standardization" (Avila & Moore, 2012). At the end of the role play, members of the board of education vote on whether to adopt, reject, or modify the CCSS, giving reasons for their vote.

CASE STUDY: THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE HALLWAY: INQUIRY INTO YOUR BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING ELA

This case study will engage your own beliefs and the beliefs of other educators regarding different approaches to teaching ELA. In observing and speaking with teachers after observing their 10th grade English classes, you realize that each one espouses very different theories about the nature of English instruction, with some focusing on the need to teach content; others on the need to teach rhetorical forms and structures; and others on the need to engage students in critical literacy.

You will then find yourself in the teachers' lounge, where you overhear more conversations that illuminate teachers' beliefs. Sarah Pancost's comments strike you as intriguing, so you set up an interview during which she speaks about her beliefs and how they inform her classroom planning, teaching, and assessing of student work. You will finally engage

in discussion with your peers regarding your own beliefs about English language arts and how these beliefs will manifest themselves in the literacy frameworks you intend to employ as a teacher.

Given your critique of the limitations of these teachers' different beliefs, what might be some alternative beliefs they could adopt? How would doing so influence or change their teaching?

Please find two or three peers and go the Teaching to Exceed Virtual School on Literaryworlds.org to find this case study for Chapter 2.

Summary

In this chapter, we reviewed different ELA curriculum frameworks based on teaching cultural literacy; literary and rhetorical forms; and skills, processes, and procedures, as distinct from but not exclusively different from our critical inquiry framework. We also examined the evolution of the standards movement leading up to the formulation of the CCSS, noting some of the limitations of the standardization of instruction. While we critiqued some of the limitations of the CCSS themselves, it is possible to implement the CCSS in ways that employ a critical inquiry approach.

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