

The common core state standards and the “basalisation” of youth

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ABSTRACT: The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were published by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association in 2010 as part of a widespread standards-based reform movement in the United States. The education marketplace has responded with CCSS-aligned products, including standardised tests, professional development training and curriculum materials. This essay examines the discourse of reading/readers that the CCSS promotes by analysing a CCSS-aligned textbook intended for 9th grade English/language arts students. In operating under a New Critical paradigm of textual interpretation, this CCSS-aligned textbook positions reading as an activity comprised of a discrete skillset allowing readers to extract meaning from a text. Reading skills are envisioned as objective, neutral and eternal – and importantly, conducive to measurement. In drawing on dominant views of youth, this CCSS-aligned textbook positions young readers as “detectives” undergoing a training regimen. Young readers are envisioned only in terms of their progress toward college and career readiness, which prioritises their future importance and discounts their importance in the present. Together, these views ignore the transactional properties of reading and the creative capacities of the reader. In this essay, I examine how these views become normalised through metaphors, marginal notes, questions/prompts, standardised goals, and testing practice in Holt McDougal’s Literature (Common Core Edition). I argue that under the CCSS, the creative activity of reading becomes simplified, and the identities of young readers become homogenised. Added together, these views promote a style of reasoning I refer to as the “basalisation” of youth.

KEYWORDS: Common Core State Standards, CCSS, standards-based reform, Race to the Top, New Criticism, reading, reader, youth, testing

HOW DO I LEARN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS?

Your textbook is closely aligned to the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards. Every time you learn a concept or practice a skill, you are working on mastery of one of the standards. Each unit, each selection, and each workshop in your textbook connects to one or more of the standards for English Language Arts listed on the following pages. (Literature [Common Core Edition], 2012, p. FM42)

In the United States, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have prompted new iterations of old narratives. One of these narratives involves reading, and the other involves readers. This essay examines how these narratives position young people. I argue that under the CCSS and its associated products of alignment, the individual identities and creative capacities of young readers become reduced, simplified, and homogenised. More specifically, I argue that young people become positioned as a monolithic group of readers in a preparatory phase of life wherein they must

accumulate and practice reading skills solely to serve their college or career readiness, a positioning I refer to as the “basalisation” of youth.

The quote at the beginning this essay was taken from a 9th-grade textbook for the English/language arts (ELA) published in 2012, a book commonly adopted in U.S. schools. The phrasings “closely aligned”, “every time you learn”, and “each unit, each selection, and each workshop” articulate a distinct hope for teachers and students: that a list of common standards can bring coherence to the learning experience in ELA classrooms. But the promise of coherence comes with substantial costs: adherence solely to future-oriented goals for education, implementation of a limited set of graduated recommendations, and the socialisation of students into confined styles of reasoning.

Published in 2010, the CCSS represent the latest iteration of standards-based reform in the United States. According to the Common Core website, the CCSS were developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices as a “state-led effort” to establish “consistent learning goals across the states” in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (CCSS Initiative, 2014). States are not required to adopt the CCSS; however, those states choosing to adopt the standards are in a more competitive position to receive grants from President Obama’s *Race to the Top* Initiative. As of this writing, 45 states had adopted the CCSS in English language arts/literacy. While the origin stories of the CCSS, and particularly the claim that they were developed as a “state-led effort”, have increasingly been questioned (Cody, 2013; Ravitch, 2014; Schneider, 2013), the effects of the CCSS are manifold. Publishers and test-developers have responded with waves of new products, and the two national testing consortia—PARCC¹ and Smarter Balanced—have begun field-testing their new CCSS-aligned item pools (Gewertz, 2014).

These events have given rise to a political and pedagogical moment in the history of ELA education in the U.S. Under the Common Core reading standards, the dynamic, constructive, and wide-ranging activity of reading has been condensed to fit a New Critical paradigm that confines the reader to the “four corners of the text” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4). New Criticism—which finds its roots in England through the work of I.A. Richards under the term “practical criticism”—is a paradigm of literary interpretation that locates the meaning of a text in the words themselves. Under a New Critical approach, readers are trained to pay attention to the details, the structure, and the form of a text in order to simultaneously produce correct interpretations and avoid errors; this approach reduces the number of texts worth considering and treats them as isolated works without connecting them to each other or to the social and cultural contexts from which they arise (Bonnycastle, 1996). The question of this essay is, “What does this moment mean for youth readers and teachers of youth readers?”

I approach this question twice. First, by examining the CCSS-aligned textbook quoted above, I offer some detail as to how this New Critical stance toward reading becomes normalised through discourse, e.g., metaphors, marginal notes, standardised goals, and testing practice. Second, I draw on scholarship about youth to intentionally shift the focus away from abstract, disembodied notions of reading to the group that the

¹ Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers

CCSS were written on behalf of: the young individuals who read, write and think in ELA classrooms. I argue that the CCSS—along with the battery of CCSS-aligned curriculum, standardised tests, and professional development materials—encourages a “basalisation” of youth readers, a term I explain below.

Basalisation

I borrow the term “basalisation” from Kenneth Goodman’s (1988) article, “Look What They’ve Done to Judy Blume!: The ‘Basalisation’ of Children’s Literature.” Because my intention is to extend the use of this term, its original use requires some explanation. In Goodman’s opening example of “basalisation”, he documents the revision of a paragraph from Judy Blume’s (1981) novel, *The One in the Middle is the Green Kangaroo*.

Original:

Freddy Dissel had two problems. One was his older brother Mike. The other was his younger sister Ellen. Freddy thought a lot about being the one in the middle. But there was nothing he could do about it. He felt like the peanut butter part of a sandwich, squeezed between Mike and Ellen. (Blume, 1981, as cited by Goodman, 1988, p. 29)

Revision:

Maggie had a big sister, Ellen.

She had a little brother, Mike.

Maggie was the one in the middle.

But what could she do? (Holt, Level 8, as cited by Goodman, 1988, p. 29)

In the revision, Freddy changes to Maggie, Mike becomes the little brother, Ellen becomes the big sister, and even the title changes from *The One in the Middle is the Green Kangaroo* to *Maggie in the Middle*. Goodman explains that these changes are likely the result of the editors’ attempt to remove sex bias from their product, and in charting out the names of all of the characters from all the stories across this level of basal reader, they decided on these particular character revisions to maintain a balanced representation. The sentence-level revisions of the text are informed by assumptions about reading comprehension used in readability formulas, e.g., vocabulary frequencies and sentence lengths (see Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013 for the relationship between readability formulas and the CCSS’s definition of “text complexity”). Goodman’s original use of “basalisation” was to characterise what happens to authentic texts when editors mobilise strict publishing criteria in the production of basal readers. As the above example demonstrates, revisions in language bring about revisions in meaning. Goodman goes on:

How could they have done this to Judy Blume? The answer is that it was done by design. It was done to fit within a basal reader built on the premise that to teach reading the language of what children read must be controlled. This revision illustrates how basals change literature to fit their self-imposed constraints. (Goodman, 1988, p. 29)

In pointing to issues of “design” and “control” and “self-imposed constraints”, Goodman makes the case that the publishing criteria informing revisions of authentic texts produce inauthentic texts and self-censorship.

While “basalisation” in this example refers to revisions of the actual words on the page, my use of the term intentionally swings the focus off the page – to those who make sense of the words, the readers. And while Goodman’s argument is located in an era of basal readers, my argument is located in an era of common standards, ample assessment, and big data. By using the term to refer to youth—as in the “basalisation” of youth—I draw attention to a narrow and synthetic construction of youth readers. Similar to what happens to the words of an authentic text under basal publishing standards, the CCSS and its associated products of alignment construct, revise and evaluate young readers according to a New Critical view of textual interpretation. Below, I offer an example of how youth become baselised by examining a recent CCSS-aligned English/language arts textbook.

Focal Text

In 2012, Holt McDougal published a textbook intended for the 9th-grade level entitled *Literature (Common Core Edition)*. Below is an overall description of the textbook to set the context for the analysis that follows.

The textbook features four major sections, each major section with three units, each unit with a Text Analysis Workshop, and each Text Analysis Workshop presented with the particular standards relevant to the intent of the workshop; this format remains consistent throughout the textbook with the exception of Unit 12 (see Table 1).

Section	Unit	Standards Focus in the Text Analysis Workshop	Verbs Applied to the Reader
Literary Elements	1. Narrative Structure	RL 5 Analyse how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.	Analyse
	2. Characterisation and Point of View	RL 3 Analyse how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.	Analyse
	3. Setting, Mood, and Imagery	RL 3 Analyse how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme. RL 4 Analyse the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.	Analyse Analyse
	4. Theme and Symbol	RL 2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyse in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.	Determine, provide
	5. Author’s Purpose	RI 3 Analyse how an author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including	analyse

A World of Ideas		<p>the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.</p> <p>RI 4 Analyse the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.</p> <p>RI 5 Analyse in detail how an author’s ideas or claims are developed and refined by sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of text.</p> <p>RI 6 Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyse how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.</p>	<p>analyse</p> <p>analyse</p> <p>determine</p>
	6. Argument and Persuasion	<p>RI 2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyse its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details.</p> <p>RI 5 Analyse in detail how an author’s ideas or claims are developed and refined by sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of text.</p> <p>RI 6 Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyse how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.</p> <p>RI 8 Analyse how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.</p> <p>SL 3 Evaluate a speaker’s use of evidence and rhetoric</p>	<p>determine</p> <p>analyse</p> <p>determine</p> <p>analyse</p> <p>evaluate</p>
The Author’s Craft	7. The Language of Poetry	<p>RL 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyse the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.</p> <p>RL 10 Read and comprehend poems.</p> <p>L5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.</p>	<p>determine analyse</p> <p>read comprehend demonstrate</p>
	8. Author’s Style and Voice	<p>RL 4 Determine the figurative and connotative meanings of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyse the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.</p> <p>RI 4 Determine the connotative meaning of</p>	<p>determine analyse</p> <p>determine</p>

		words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyse the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.	analyse
		L3 Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.	apply, to understand, to make, to comprehend
	9. History, Culture, and the Author	RL 4 Determine the figurative meaning of phrases as they are used in a text; analyse the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.	determine analyse
The Classic Tradition	10. The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet	RL 3 Analyse how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme. RL 9 Analyse how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work. RL 10 Read and comprehend dramas.	analyse; analyse; read, comprehend
	11. The Odyssey	RL 4 Determine the figurative meanings of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyse the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. RL 5 Analyse how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise. RL 6 Analyse a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of world literature. RL 10 Read and comprehend stories and poems.	determine analyse analyse read comprehend
	12. The Power of Research	N/A	N/A

Table 1. Organisation and standards alignment of focal text

Each unit ends with a Writing Workshop and, again with the exception of Unit 12, a section titled “Assessment Practice”. The assessment practice features a list of relevant standards being assessed, reading passages, and questions in the style of large-scale, standardised assessments (i.e., multiple choice and constructed response items). Unit 12 follows a slightly different format because it is devoted to writing research papers; the Text Analysis Workshop that introduces previous units is replaced by a Research Strategies Workshop.

Throughout the units, the stories, poems, pictures, and essays are accompanied by a “Standards Focus”, which includes text-boxes in the margin, prompting readers to answer a CCSS-aligned question. For example, Unit 1 includes a chapter from Richard Wright’s novel *Black Boy*, entitled, “The Rights to the Streets of Memphis”. The end of the first paragraph is accompanied by a marginal box with the following prompt:

COMMON CORE RI 1
CAUSE AND EFFECT

After only the first paragraph, you can already begin drawing conclusions about Wright’s early life and the ideas he expresses in this autobiography. At this point, what cause-and-effect relationship did Wright start to recognise? Cite evidence in your response. (p. 118)

The first line indexes the standard; the second line provides a category label for the prompt; and the rest of the box includes the prompt. RI 1 refers to *Reading Informational Text, Grades 9-10*, which states, “Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.” These CCSS-aligned prompts are found in the margins throughout the textbook.

The Text Analysis Workshop sections that begin Units 1–11 feature text-boxes in the margin labelled “Close Reading”. These text-boxes feature text-dependent questions corresponding to model passages. Each text workshop has specific standards it addresses. Unit 2’s text workshop, for example, addresses strand RL 3, *Reading Literature, Grades 9-10*, which states, “Analyse how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.” Several models of close reading are provided to demonstrate how to perform the standard. For example, next to an excerpt from *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier is the following prompt: “Find an example of a direct comment about the Goober. Then find an example in which the narrator allows you to ‘see’ his thoughts. An example of each has been boxed.” Two correct examples from the passage are provided in boxes: (a) “The Goober was beautiful when he ran” and (b) “When he ran, he forgot about his acne and his awkwardness.”

An “Assessment Practice” section concludes each unit, except for Unit 12. These sections include questions/prompts corresponding to stimulus material such as reading passages and/or pictures; the majority of the questions are multiple-choice items and some are constructed response items. In the span of the textbook are 308 test items, 278 multiple choice and 30 constructed response. The constructed response items, although not multiple choice, are written with an anticipated range of responses in mind. For example, “In ‘La Puerta,’ what does the door symbolise? Support your response with evidence from the text” (p. 195). The symbol + evidence format is typical of the constructed response items in this textbook.

ANALYSIS

The Holt McDougal CCSS-aligned textbook is merely one artifact of the current times, but I would like to suggest that rather than being trivial, it represents two

concurrent discourses in the political and publishing world surrounding ELA education, one about *reading* and the other about *readers*. Both of these discourses work in the “basalisation” of youth readers – the simplification, reduction and revision of young individuals into a uniform set of readers with normalised interpretations of texts. Below is an exploration of these two discourses using *Literature (Common Core Edition)*, the 9th grade focal text, as an entry point into examining the *reading/reader* discourses in the era of the CCSS.

Reading

The first method by which the CCSS basalisés young readers is by ignoring them. Much of the language surrounding the CCSS promotes *reading* without foregrounding the necessary agents who enact it; that is, the discourse points to *reading* without a *reader*. To illustrate this point, Aukerman (2014), in ironically taking up the charge to do the “close reading” emphasised in the discourse, found that a CCSS-aligned document from PARCC repeatedly framed *reading* as being disconnected from *readers*. This reading-without-reader mentality pervades Holt McDougal’s *Literature (Common Core Edition)* textbook as well. Given the verbs the CCSS ascribes to readers, which emphasise acts of *analysis* and *determination* (see Table 1), the CCSS-aligned Text Analysis Workshops found throughout the textbook portray reading as a type of careful diagnosis whereby readers take on the persona of an expert clinician or professional detective setting out to bring an issue to resolution.

This discourse of literate behaviour is not surprising considering David Coleman, who is acknowledged as a central figure in the writing of the ELA standards, claims that “the standards require you to read like a detective and write like an investigative reporter” (Coleman, 2011, p. 4); however, this discourse of reading is also somewhat surprising given decades of reader-response theory and research that documents the dynamic relationship readers have with texts. Rather than a reduction to a detective-type activity, reader-response research suggests that reading is more appropriately framed as a non-trivial sense-making activity that is embodied, contextualised, and non-neutral (Beach, 1993; Tompkins, 1980). As a sense-making activity, readers employ cultural models to make sense of the words on the page (Gee, 2012; Thein, 2009) in context-bound literacy events (Heath, 1983) that prompt envisionments (Langer, 1995) brought about by individuals who are aged, classed, gendered and raced (Schweickart & Flynn, 2004). In short, reading is a social practice, entailing all of the complexities of the social world (Street, 1984).

A view of reading as a sense-making activity located in a social world, however, is not welcome in the current climate of testing and alignment. To appreciate why, consider the *location of meaning*. When reading is theorised as something more than detective work, the location of meaning shifts from being within a text to being within a reader-text relationship. Instead of collecting meaning that was placed by an author, readers evoke meaning through a transaction that is socially and culturally situated. Rosenblatt (1938), in developing the theoretical underpinnings of this transactional theory of reading, suggested that terms often taken for granted, such as reader, student, or literary work, are fictions:

There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual

literary works. A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. (p. 25)

By pointing to the impossibility of generic readers and generic literary works, Rosenblatt established a central tenet of this theory of reading: In making meaning out of inkblots, readers are also authors. The CCSS, however, does not confer such authority to readers and instead places a strict division between authors and readers. Take, for example, the following 9th–10th grade ELA standard for reading literature.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5

Analyse how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension or surprise. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 38)

In this standard, the author is the creator. A reader is to look upon the words, sentences and paragraphs, analyse the author’s choices in structure and manipulations of time, and passively observe the author’s creation unfold. The standard encourages readers to understand these authorial choices in terms of their mystery, tension or surprise. Underlying this standard is the argument that “mystery, tension or surprise” is an achievement of the author rather than an achievement of an author-reader transaction.

According to Rosenblatt’s (1938, 1978) view and the associated reading research, the mystery/tension/surprise effect is necessarily co-authored by the author and the reader. Readers enter into the world suggested by a text by actively imagining the possibilities that make sense to them, which is a visible and real phenomenon to ELA teachers who ask their students, “When you read this paragraph, what do you see? What do the images mean?” This is not to say that textual interpretation amounts to an “affective fallacy”, as critics would later claim (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954), but that meaning is something that is located in a transaction between reader-texts-authors, and the sensation readers experience of inkblots taking on meaning is based on that transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978). Rather than being a simple exercise in detective work, transactional theories of reading see readers as culturally and socially situated, promoting the sense-making activity to “quite a more impressive enterprise” (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 134), one in which texts, too, are engraved with social and political markings and work to position readers, a dynamic that is itself integrated into the meaning making process (Lewis, 2000).

While the division between authors and readers deepens within the CCSS paradigm of reading, the status of the words on the page rises. An author’s words on the page are celebrated to such an extent as to override any attention to the activity of the reader. Words on the page, “merely inkblots” in Rosenblatt’s view, are conceptualised as *containers* for meaning in the CCSS view. Rather than applying a creative process to words in order to *evoke* meaning, readers pay very close attention to the words to *extract* meaning. David Coleman and Susan Pimentel (2012), two figures heavily involved in writing the ELA standards, mobilise this view when they encourage “close reading” within the “four corners of the text”, which requires readers to read “short, self-contained texts” (p. 4). The term “self-contained text” is left undefined. However, the focal textbook of this essay, *Literature (Common Core Edition)*, provides examples of how the term becomes operationalised.

As stated previously, the textbook features Text Analysis Workshops, which are populated with demonstrations of how to perform a close reading of a self-contained text. The first unit has three text excerpts with close-reading questions in the margins. The words “Close Read” appear in red letters above the questions. The first story is from “Brothers are the Same”, a short story by Beryl Markham; the text excerpt features one full paragraph, one partial paragraph, an explanation from the textbook authors about what happens next, then four more full paragraphs of the story. It is unclear as to whether or not these final four paragraphs mark the end of the story. The second story is from “Sweet Potato Pie”, a short story by Eugenia Collier; the text excerpt features five full paragraphs; the excerpt ends before the end of the story. The third story is titled “Checkouts”, a short story by Cynthia Rylant; this story appears in its entirety. To recap: The first story is presented as two noncontiguous parts, the second is curtailed, and the third is presented in full. If each of these three stories represent a “self-contained text”, then the essential factor qualifying the texts for the “self-contained” designation seems to have nothing to do with the texts at all, but rather the questions that appear alongside them. Any text, then, could be treated as “self-contained” as long as the questions asked of it ignore the author’s larger purposes for writing it, the reader’s larger purposes for reading it, and the larger social and cultural context giving rise to it.

Literature (Common Core Edition) provides these Text Analysis Workshops and Assessment Practice to routinise the New Critical theory of reading under which PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments operate. Test-developers require a theory of reading that allows test items to produce interpretable information about test-takers. Differences in test-takers’ responses to reading passages based on their unique socially and culturally situated life histories potentially undermine the meaning one can assign to a reading score. Item writers, therefore, must compose questions and prompts undergirded by New Criticism to ensure scores between test-takers are comparable in some way (see Smarter Balanced [2012] for an example of an item writer’s guide). While transactional views of reading might enjoy empirical support (Galda & Beach, 2001), New Criticism is the theory of reading championed by this era of standards, assessment and accountability, not because it is defensible, but because it is an expedient theory of reading for locating meaning in a standard, manageable and convenient place: the “self-contained” text itself.

The style of New Critical questioning promoted by the CCSS did not happen by chance, but by design. New Criticism’s emphasis on self-contained texts, close reading, and text-dependent questions aligns with the modes of reading necessary to perform well on standardised tests of reading. Those associated with the testing industry had a standing presence on the CCSS development teams and validation committee – including representatives from the National Centre for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, Assessment & Standards Development Services at WestEd, National Center on Educational Outcomes, Educational Testing Service, Achieve, ACT, and the Test Development Center of the Florida Department of Education (NGA, 2009; NGA & CCSSO, 2010). PARCC and Smarter Balanced, the two testing consortia that won \$360 million in *Race to the Top* funds to develop the CCSS-aligned tests, have also committed to developing CCSS-aligned curriculum materials, with publishers, universities, non-profits and philanthropies also taking part (Gewertz, 2011). The CCSS provides guidance for test developers to generate test specifications and, in turn, for publishers to align with the tests. If reading becomes

defined as a discrete set of skills, an enumeration of chronologically ordered categories, an activity evidenced by anticipatable responses, then it becomes amenable to measurement. In short, the New Critical view of reading is a test-ready view.

To fully appreciate how this New Critical discourse works at a more granular level, again consider *Literature (Common Core Edition)*, Holt McDougal’s CCSS-aligned product. It features 74 pages of “close reading” examples and 102 pages of “Assessment Practice”. Moreover, the stories, poems, essays and pictures of each unit of the textbook are often accompanied by CCSS-aligned prompts and questions. As a general indication of how often this type of alignment happens, Table 2 provides a ratio of pages with explicitly aligned prompts and questions—ones that are labelled with a particular standard—to those without explicit alignment. Overall, explicit alignment appears throughout the textbook at a ratio of about 1:1, which is actually underestimated when taking into account the full-page pictures and title pages found throughout the book, which inflate the number of pages without explicit alignment (see Table 2).

Unit	Page Total	Pages with explicit alignment to CCSS (reading)	Alignment Ratio
1	174	76	76:98 (0.78)
2	128	64	64:64 (1.00)
3	104	51	51:53 (0.96)
4	118	62	62:56 (1.11)
5	102	58	58:44 (1.32)
6	86	55	55:31 (1.77)
7	80	44	44:36 (1.22)
8	98	58	58:40 (1.45)
9	104	53	53:51 (1.04)
10	166	53	53:113 (0.47)
11	104	43	43:61 (0.70)
12	49	30	30:19 (1.58)
Total	1313	647	647:666 (0.97)

Table 2. Alignment ratio

All of this alignment activity works to normalise a New Critical approach to reading; in turn, a normalisation of New Critical reading begets a normalisation of the people expected to do it. Individual readers entering into dynamic transactions with texts become reduced to an abstract crowd enacting an itemised set of skills the CCSS calls reading. Analogous to Goodman’s example of a basalised version of Judy Blume, a normalisation of the reader is a basalisation of the reader. Under basal publishing standards, synthetic texts take precedence over authentic texts, and the meaning of an author’s prose becomes simplified, changed and censored; under the CCSS, *reading* takes precedence over the reader – whose sense-making activities are revised, reduced and cheapened. A New Critical stance toward reading pervades the publishing and political discourse. “To read” becomes synonymous with “to investigate”. “To

understand” becomes a direct effect of “close reading”. In the next section, I further examine how this New Critical, reduced view of reading also forwards a simplified and reduced view of readers.

Readers

Who are the readers the CCSS imagines? As mentioned above, Coleman’s (2011) preferred metaphor to describe a reader is “detective”, which encourages the New Critical approach to reading outlined above and casts a story or poem or novel as a type of crime scene. The author, when the metaphor is taken to its fullest conclusion, is most likely the perpetrator but might also be a victim, but in any case, ideas are crimes. A reader-as-detective must search a text, evaluate different parts of it, and accumulate evidence in order to substantiate an interpretation.

What does this metaphor say about readers in terms of their intentions for reading? As Coleman positions reading as an act of snooping around the text, he also positions a reader as a certain type of person, someone who needs training in the proper methods of thinking. The CCSS offers the young reader an articulated training manual in achieving the detective-as-reader status, but the reader must *go through* the training to *get there*. The implication is that young readers who do not perform the reading habits the CCSS promotes have not yet arrived; they are still going through the training, still learning how to think. The view that young readers need to go through a training program for a future end is reinforced by the rhetorical groundwork from the CCSS’s inception: that the standards prepare students for a future time in their college or career. The preparation requires young people to take disempowered positions – as readers, their sense-making activities are closely observed, measured and intervened upon in the service of caring for their futures.

In *Literature (Common Core Edition)*, a similar metaphor comes from Carol Jago’s introductory remarks. These remarks appear at the beginning of a 28-page section entitled “Student Guide to Academic Success,” which details each of the standards and provides extended examples of how to enact them under orange labels that read *LEARN HOW*. Jago’s first paragraphs of the two-page introduction, under the title “The Common Core for Uncommon Achievement”, set the tone:

The Common Core State Standards make clear where students are going. They describe what today’s children need to know and be able to do to thrive in post-secondary education and the workplace. By focusing on results – the destination – rather than on the how – the means of transportation – the Common Core allows for a variety of teaching methods and many different classroom approaches. The challenge for teachers is to turn the daily journey towards this destination into an intellectual adventure.

One way to think about the Common Core is as a kind of GPS device to situate curriculum. While some students may choose the road less traveled, the objective is fixed. When students become lost through a wrong turn, teachers recalculate the route, providing a calm and confident voice that guides all students to academic achievement and deep literacy. (p. FM40)

Students are “travellers” in this metaphor, and they are positioned as being under the guidance of the Common Core, “a kind of GPS device”. Teachers in this metaphor are

tasked with observing the students’ wrong turns and recalculating their respective routes—a message that is later made literal in each of the Assessment Practice sections in the units that follow, where a marginal note reads, “After you take the practice test, your teacher can help you identify any standards you need to review.” This view of the reader encourages a style of reasoning that separates people by age. The students, as younger people, are *on the way to a destination* while the teachers, as older people, *have arrived*. The teacher/student relationship is one of the observer and the observed, the evaluator and the evaluated, and the adjuster and adjusted. Undoubtedly, this style of reasoning is interlinked to the New Critical stance toward reading described in the previous section, but also at work is a larger discourse about young people. Who are the readers the CCSS images? And why are they positioned as travellers under the supervision of adults?

To respond to these questions, I draw on scholarship that critiques dominant views of youth. In tracing a history of cultural talk about youth, Lesko (2012) points to a prevailing depiction of young people as a monolithic group that must undergo management and supervision to successfully become productive members of society. Young people become defined in terms of their “coming of age” status, a time marked by crises of identity, raging hormones, and peer group affiliations. The tendency within these views is to imply that young people are somehow less individuated than their adult counterparts. Particularly salient in the quote above, as well as in the discourse of readers in the CCSS generally, is that young people are in a preparation phase of their lives. *College and career readiness* becomes the watchword of this discourse. In Carol Jago’s language above, this watchword is articulated with the line “They [the CCSS] describe what today’s children need to know and be able to do to thrive in post-secondary education and the workplace.” Post-secondary education and the workplace, as defined here, is a predictable location with predictable requisite skills for success. These skills are positioned as neutral, objective, eternal – and *known*.

Young readers in this discourse are conceptualised merely in terms of their state of becoming. They will someday *enter in* to the real world. This discourse of becoming prioritises the future over the present or the past, and because the future is inherently unknown, policymakers have a place—an entire *tense*—into which fears and hopes can be recruited. Prioritising the future tense is prominent in the media, governmental policies, social science, and the judicial system, where young people are often represented as increasingly “at risk,” unsettled, and unready, a potentially corrupting influence on the future of the nation, despite empirical support suggesting the opposite (Males, 1996; Nichols & Good, 2004).

In an educational context, dominant views of youth potentially position students as “others”, deepening the separation between adults and young people (Petroni & M. Lewis, 2012; C. Lewis & Finders, 2002; Sarigianides, 2012). Instead of acknowledging young readers as capable thinkers, publishers approach the youth market with narratives that revise socially and culturally complexity issues into didactic messages (Thein, Sulzer & Schmidt, 2013). Adolescence itself is “often perceived as a wasteland” (Vadeboncoeur, 2005, p. 1). This dominant way of reasoning about youth is built into the CCSS framework, as they are positioned as undergoing training or traversing a distance in order to live up to who (and where) they need to be. To be sure, most people think of themselves and others in terms of

the future. Adults and youth alike are always in preparation for the future, but young people in the current educational climate are considered *only* in terms of the future, discounting their value and importance in the present.

This dominant way of thinking about young people culminates in the CCSS version of a young reader. The front-matter of *Literature (Common Core Edition)* serves as a good example. The standards appear in tables, the left side listing THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARD and the right side describing WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU. The table for the *Reading Standards for Literature* demonstrates the shift in tense that appears in all of the others (see Table 3). On the left side, verbs appear at the beginning of each standard in the present tense – “Cite”, “Determine”, “Analyse”, for example. On the right side, the second person pronoun *you* begins each statement followed by the auxiliary verb *will* followed by a verb – so “You will use”, “You will analyse”, “You will compare and contrast”, for example.

This shift in language positions young readers in terms of their future activity and connotes an atmosphere of consequences for those readers unable to perform the directives. These directives, if taken up as a practice, inculcate young readers into habits of self-censorship. Consider the language of the second standard. On the left side, readers are encouraged to produce “an objective summary”. On the right side, the language shifts to: “You will also summarise the main idea of the text as a whole without adding your ideas or opinions.” The possibility of producing an “objective summary” is dubious, and when the language shifts on the WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU side, the reader’s ideas/opinions merely become nuisance variables in the interpretive process. In other words, ideas/opinions get in the way of real reading and must be suspended. The ideas—or the singular “main idea” in the language of Standard 2—belong to the author, who is presumably older and *has arrived*.

The reading standards in Table 3 position the reader as someone who must perform a set of skills and suspend ideas and opinions. This language works to confine the reader into a circular definition: A reader is someone who performs reading skills. Absent from this definition is any understanding of the reader as having a race, class, gender or life history. Instead, the CCSS simply positions the reader as a young person in a period of transition, waiting to go to college or begin a career. This fixed identity of the reader is a “basalisation” of youth, a revision of youth into a simple formula that assumes they will become full participants of our society in the future, but are not full participants now.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARD	WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU
Key Ideas and Details	
1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	You will use details and information from the text to support its main ideas—both those that are stated directly and those that are suggested.
2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyse in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.	You will analyse the development of the text’s main ideas and themes by showing how they progress throughout the text. You will also summarise the main idea of the text as a whole without adding your own ideas or opinions.

3. Analyse how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.	You will analyse the development of a text’s characters and how their actions, thoughts, and words contribute to the story’s plot or themes.
Craft and Structure	
4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyse the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).	You will analyse specific words and phrases in the text to determine both what they mean individually as well as how they contribute to the text’s tone and meaning as a whole
5. Analyse how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g. pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.	You will analyse the ways in which the author has chosen to structure and order the text and determine how those choices affect the text’s mood or tone.
6. Analyse a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.	You will analyse the point of view or cultural experience of a work of literature from outside the United States.
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas	
7. Analyse the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasised or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and Breughel’s <i>Landscape with the Fall of Icarus</i>).	You will compare and contrast how events and information are presented in visual and non-visual texts.
8. (Not applicable to literature)	
9. Analyse how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).	You will recognise and analyse how an author draws from and uses source material from other texts or other types of sources.
Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity	
10. By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	You will demonstrate the ability to read and understand grade-level appropriate literary texts by the end of grade 9.

Table 3. Reproduced Table from *Literature (Common Core Edition)*, pp. FM45-FM46

DISCUSSION

The adoption of the CCSS has heralded an era of CCSS-aligned products. Combined, these two forces promote a discourse that holds *reading* as separate from *readers*. *Reading* as a disembodied set of skills finds backing from New Critical views of literary interpretation and double-backing from the testing industry; and *reader* as an abstract, normalised identity finds backing in dominant discourses of youth. Under the

CCSS, young people become caught on a road, traversing a distance on the way to their colleges or careers, and their identities as people—complex intersections of race, class, age, gender and life history—are merely distractions in the detective work of reading. This basalisation of youth readers erases their identities and diminishes their importance in the present.

A basalisation of youth readers does not come without sponsorship. Brandt’s (1998) interviews with a diverse group of more than 100 individuals born from approximately 1900-1980 reveal that the ways in which people learn to read and write are interrelated with external economic interests, suggesting that “it is useful to think about who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use” (p. 166). While this essay focuses on how young people are positioned under the CCSS via a *reader/reading* dichotomy, more attention should be paid to those entities that stand to benefit from such a dichotomy. The dynamic interplay between legislation, curriculum and testing underwrites waves of new products, and the dominant mode of thinking about young people, i.e., in terms of their readiness for the future, becomes the primary selling point. The movement promises that a CCSS-aligned education equates to a guarantee of preparation for the “real” world, an emphasis that devalues the present lives of young people by ignoring the fact that the “real” world and the classroom world are the same place.

Teachers, too, have been recruited as sponsors of the CCSS version of literacy learning. Through professional development and product placement, teachers are encouraged to adopt the *reading/readers* dichotomy. CCSS-aligned teaching practices become branded as innovative, different and more intelligent; it’s teaching that uses formative data collection techniques, integrates information from benchmark assessments, measures student development on priority standards, and adapts lessons based on necessary interventions. This branding process is what Newkirk (2013) refers to as “mystification”, defined as “taking a practice that was once viewed as within the normal competence of a teacher and making it seem so technical and advanced that a new commercial product (or form of consultation) is necessary” (p. 5).

The mystification encouraged by the CCSS devalues teachers as professionals, requiring them to sit through condescending professional development exercises while being handed products and procedures outlining unrealistic, stepwise approaches to the classroom. In the most pessimistic version of the story, teachers become relegated to enactors of merchandise sent down from a higher order of “expert”. But there is a story of optimism as well. Because teachers are the ones working directly with students, they are also the ones who (re)define the standards in their everyday classroom interactions. As Beach (2011) observes, “Although the standards framers may have had certain notions of the meaning of ‘synthesise and apply information presented in diverse ways,’ a teacher may define this standards language in quite different ways based on different paradigmatic conceptions of literacy learning” (p. 180). Literacy practices take shape in the routines of the school and the people who go there as students and teachers (Heron-Hruby, Hagood & Alvermann, 2008), and ultimately, the idea that the Common Core offers a unified set of standards that evoke a universal interpretation is a fiction. The standards will continue to evolve, ironically, through the transactional processes of reading that stand at odds to the New Critical views the standards endorse.

The Common Core is unlikely to be around forever, and similar to *No Child Left Behind*, political support will likely shift elsewhere. Already, the standards have met organised resistance in Seattle, where teachers who successfully boycotted a previous standardised test have vowed to boycott the new CCSS-aligned tests as well (Herz, 2014). But the discourse about young people that basalises them, that revises them into a normalised reader by uncoupling knowledge creation from subjective experience, will most likely be present in the next iteration of reforms as well. New Criticism, the ideological source of the basalisation of youth, is a politically, economically, and historically sustainable approach to readers/reading because sense-making framed in this way, as a discrete set of skills located on a proficiency scale, allows politicians to recruit their constituents’ hopes and fears about young people, allows the testing industry to maintain its status, and allows the familiar idea that young people are important only in terms of their futures to remain the dominant mode of thought guiding the educational policies about them.

Inspiration for a new direction might come from Rosenblatt’s (1938) decades-old critique, which identified and questioned several elements of the New Critical framework that have been reinvigorated by the Common Core.

In recent decades the influence of the “New Criticism” and other critical approaches has also tended to diminish the concern with the human meaningfulness of the literary work. The stress on “close reading” was unfortunately associated with the notion of the “impersonality” of the poet and the parallel impersonality of the critic. “The work itself” was said to be the critic’s prime concern, as though it existed apart from any reader. Analysis of the technique of the work, concern over tone, metaphor, symbol, and myth, has therefore tended to crowd out the ultimate questions concerning relevance or value to the reader in his ongoing life. (pp. 29-30)

Rosenblatt’s observation about New Criticism’s diminished concern with human meaningfulness anticipates the cumulative effect of the CCSS and its alignment products, which is to “crowd out” issues of relevance or value or purpose. The whole point of engaging with the text is lost.

The prominent discourse in *Literature (Common Core Edition)* is of readers doing the activity of reading, an activity reduced to a type of “self-contained” hobby requiring “self-contained” texts, which, if they exist, are inherently an unimportant type of text. As Short (2013) notes,

Literature was not written to teach a strategy but to illuminate life...If readers are only engaged in text analysis, as recommended by the CCSS, they do not learn to question the text itself and the assumptions about society on which the text is based. (para. 2-4)

I would also like to include Aukerman’s (2013) suggestion that the sense-making activity of the reader should be “unassailable” and

...anyone who does the human work of trying to make sense of text should be entitled to a place at the table. That some resolved meaning will be factually wrong, or even on occasion morally questionable, does not mean the work of sense-making can be dismissed (p. A21).

An epistemological commitment to seeing reading as a transaction between authors-readers-texts and an ethical commitment to seeing the reader’s sense-making activity as inherently important perhaps provides a frame with which to build new standards. While articulating standards without referring to content is often an exercise in “vacuous verbiage” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 20), I would like to suggest that not all vacuous verbiage shares the same values. Below are five standards—written purposefully from a place of naiveté and optimism—that might serve as a counterweight to the CCSS and its resulting basalisation of young readers. The previous cadence of “You will” from the textbook has been replaced with “Together, we will continue to” to acknowledge that in ELA classrooms, teachers and students read, write and think together, and it’s not the first time they have.

- Together, we will continue to read literature to raise our awareness of how our identities – dynamic confluences of race, class, ethnicity, gender and history – *matter* in our interpretive process.
- Together, we will continue to read and search for stories, poems, documents and images that represent something important for our current time and place in history.
- Together, we will continue to read and explore the multiple meanings of stories, building on each other’s meanings, and placing these meanings in our social world.
- Together, we will continue to read in order to participate in a conversation, identifying topics that matter and authors who can speak to us, and we will commit to saying something important in the conversation.
- Together, we will continue to read as if the things we read matter and as if we matter too.

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