

A Call for Subterfuge: Shielding the ELA Classroom from the Restrictive Sway of the Common Core

This author discusses how ELA instructors must practice subterfuge and resist standardization by using Personal Standards.

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ubterfuge.

This word, spoken by my graduate professor, took me aback.

Here was a respected instructor advising a group of secondary English teachers to covertly challenge parts of the educational system. She insisted that teaching involves vigilant negotiation with, and pointed interrogation of, those policies that do not serve the best interests of teachers and students. I have thought frequently on her advice since then, and I believe it to be especially wise counsel when considering the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). I am in the midst of my eighth year teaching high school English, and this year, like the last few, has been both exhilarating and frustrating. Teaching has always provoked these two emotions, but the recent past has featured more of the latter. The CCSS have contributed much to this, and after grappling with them for the past two years, I have reached some conclusions. The English language arts (ELA) standards are compositionally flawed and further distorted by a high-stakes environment that discourages balanced, meaningful pedagogy; to subvert this reality, teachers must practice subterfuge by foregrounding Personal Standards as the primary drivers of instruction.

Standards: My Recent History

I have always sought to practice the subterfuge my professor described. While acknowledging mandated standards, my ultimate focus has been on crafting meaningful, student-centered lessons. Before the CCSS, I navigated the North Carolina

Standard Course of Study (NCSCS). My lesson plans always referenced the standards, and they were posted on my classroom wall as well. Despite these outward affirmations of compliance, I truly derived instructional inspiration from my values, collaboration with colleagues, and students' lives. In actuality, the standards were peripheral guidelines. My students were largely successful writers, readers, and thinkers despite the standards, not because of them, and my subversive acts ensured a holistic, personalized curriculum. This arrangement was challenged, though, by the arrival of the CCSS. From rumored to realized, they are fixtures of the present-day educational landscape: they appear as objectives on lesson plans, checkboxes on teacher evaluations, and they serve as the basis for a multitude of standardized tests. They are omnipresent and restrictive, and within the ELA classroom, the reading standards are especially concerning.

CCSS Reading Standards: Curtailing Student Exploration

The reading standards limit students' engagement with text. In "Cutting to the Common Core: Analyzing Informational Text," Kate Kinsella writes, "80–90% of the reading standards in every grade require text-dependent analysis—being able to answer questions only by referring back to the assigned text, not by drawing upon and referencing prior knowledge and experiences." This methodology mirrors New Criticism literary theory as it asserts that meaning resides in text, and the reader's purpose is to extract said meaning. Unfortunately,

the reading standards overwhelmingly support this limited approach. For example, CCSS.ELA-Literacy .RI.9-10.2 reads, “Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text . . . provide an objective summary of the text” (40). Likewise, many other reading standards repeat “the text” multiple times, disproportionately promote close reading, and orient students away from reader response. Perhaps the CCSS ELA Publishers’ Criteria depicts this misguided ideology best: “drawing knowledge from the text itself *is the point of*

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reading” (Coleman and Pimentel 1; italics added). Certainly, students should learn to analyze text, but the standards do not adequately encourage reading practices other than critical examination. Thomas Newkirk, in “The Text Itself: Some Thoughts on the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts,” comments on this: “[T]hey [the CCSS] create a sterile

and, in my view, inhumanly fractured model of what goes on in deep reading . . . they consistently use metaphors of *extraction* to describe the reading process: ‘drawing knowledge from the text itself’ ‘acquisition of knowledge’ ‘Complex text is a rich repository’ ‘they need to read and extract knowledge and insight’” (1). This obsession with close analysis has created classrooms in which text is elevated over students, and deep transactional reading is replaced by mechanistic inspection. A scan of my files displays a host of lesson plans reflecting this reality, and a search of my memory reveals the subsequent results: a myopic focus on close reading, a teacher inwardly questioning the value of this approach, and disengaged students scrutinizing text while openly hoping for more. Ultimately, these text-centric lessons severed the reciprocal relationship between reader and text. Louise M. Rosenblatt once wrote, “[B]ooks do not simply happen to people. People also happen to books. A story or poem or play is merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols” (66). In other words, students create textual meaning as they bring personal experience and prior knowledge to the page, and an acknowledgment of this creates a classroom climate that encourages divergent

interpretations and a richer reading experience. This climate invites students to approach text as a canvas prepared for their interpretations rather than a puzzle to be solved, and the elevation of reader over text privileges students as creative individuals capable of both extracting and inscribing meaning.

In opposition to CCSS chief architect David Coleman, who advocates “shifting the focus of literacy instruction to center on careful examination of the text itself” (Coleman and Pimentel 1), I have found that successful instruction centers on students. Teenagers engage when they detect relevance in classroom texts, and my successful units encourage this by focusing on an essential question or theme related to human experience. My students do critically examine text, but close analysis is secondary to the essential question or theme because an exploration limited to the text itself is unlikely to catalyze students to acquire a greater interest in reading, scrutinize their own lives, or critique the world around them. Importantly, such analytical habits are expected in many college classrooms, but the CCSS do not explicitly endorse them. In their English and humanities courses, college students are expected to not only read critically but also imaginatively; textual interrogation provokes an analysis of associated social issues and a critical examination of questions related to human existence. This reality, unlike the reading standards, reflects Mike Rose’s view of language as providing “the means to probe the world and to push back on others’ interpretation of it” (*Why School?* 36). The student’s gaze must encompass *both* the page and the world, and this is more likely to occur if the text is acknowledged while the present context and human beings in the room remain the principal curricular components. Such exploration requires text-to-self and text-to-world connections, but these actions are not explicitly sanctioned by the CCSS; in this way, the reading standards are woefully underdeveloped and discouraging of meaningful student engagement. Unfortunately, this reductive, text-centric methodology is not unique to the reading standards. The Publishers’ Criteria specifies that “work in reading and writing (as well as speaking and listening) must center on the text under consideration” (Coleman and Pimentel 1). This establishes a restrictive focus for all ELA standards, yet it is worsened by the high-stakes culture enclosing them.

Standardization and Curricular Constriction

Broader social and political forces have made the CCSS more than misguided, yet manageable, curricular standards. In truth, they function as an overbearing instrument of standardization. Julie Gorlewski explains how standards and standardization differ: “Standards encourage engagement around big ideas and meaningful, authentic activities. Conversely, standardization narrows curriculum and limits pedagogy. . . . The positive possibilities of standards . . . frequently become co-opted by narrowed applications of associated curricula and assessments” (85, 87). Normally, I would manage the CCSS as I did the NCSCS before them: incorporate what is useful and discard the rest. However, present circumstances are anything but normal. Race to the Top has intensely standardized public education, and the CCSS are tethered to many of its resulting policies and practices. First, the CCSS drive current and forthcoming high-stakes tests: “The [CCSS] are joined at the hip to standardized tests. . . . The Department of Education has committed 300 million dollars to the creation of these new tests, which are now being designed by two consortia, PARCC and Smarter Balanced. These tests will give operational reality to the standards—in effect they will become the standards” (Newkirk, “Speaking Back” 4). Second, test results feed directly into teacher evaluations in many states, and these pending, more frequent high-stakes assessments will further constrain educators (“Common Core Assessment Myths”). Simultaneously, tenure rights have been weakened in various states. Predictably, these changes to accountability measures and job security discourage educators from teaching outside assessed standards. Lastly, the CCSS are homogenizing educational materials (Cody 33–34), and further narrowing of curricula seems likely when considering the Publishers’ Criteria’s reference to “paring away elements that distract or are at odds with the Common Core State Standards” (Coleman and Pimentel 1). These conditions have created submissive teachers, pressured to follow standardized curricula at the expense of their autonomy, and listless students who comply but are unable to truly connect with increasingly narrow, sterile content. My own classroom has been oppressed by

this standardization, but I have used a new form of subterfuge to preserve meaningful education despite it.

Personal Standards

Since the CCSS are not standards but rather mechanisms of standardization, I have responded by creating Personal Standards to protect meaningful pedagogy. These are *genuine* standards, as “[they] enable learning to connect the lives of students and teachers with larger, global issues . . . standards create opportunities for interdisciplinary exploration and critical pedagogies that link the local with the global in innovative, genuine ways” (Gorlewski 85). These guidelines are personalized in that they highlight the life experiences and interests of teachers and students. Teacher agency is ensured because each standard is created at the classroom level, and students are acknowledged because these standards reflect their cultural backgrounds and interests. In contrast to the remotely devised CCSS, Personal Standards privilege the diversity of local reality.

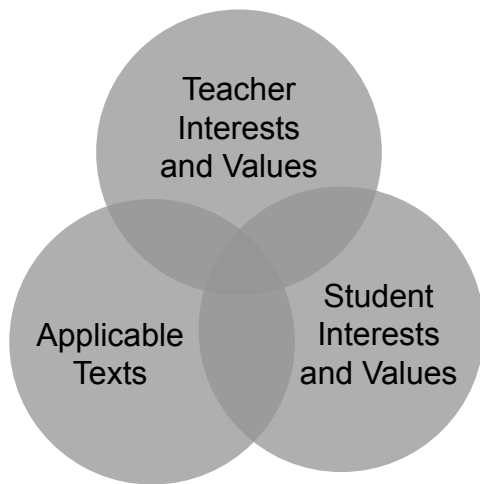
These invaluable guidelines should not supplant mandated standards, but they should *always* accompany and, at times, overshadow them. Doing so allows educators to resist the standardization that has marginalized classroom elements supporting meaningful education such as **teacher interests and values**, **student interests and values**, and **applicable texts** (I will refer to these elements as “pillars”). Each pillar plays a significant role in the educational process and should be balanced alongside the others. In the current educational environment, acknowledging the pillars and promoting their equal representation functions as an act of teacher subterfuge (see Figure 1).

My Personal Standards have provoked resonant learning experiences that honored the pillars and subverted standardization. To illustrate how, I will include my standards and discuss how they informed the design of a meaningful curriculum.

Teacher Agency: Recognizing My Own Importance

PS.ELA.9-12.1 I serve as an active participant in the educational process by selecting curricula that reflects my own values and interests.

FIGURE 1. The Three Pillars of Meaningful Education



Several years ago, I participated in an intriguing graduate course titled *Trauma and the Literature of Survival* in which we explored the portrayal of soldiers in literature, the plight of soldiers in reality, and the spaces in which they intersected. This content was personal, as several of my relatives had experienced combat, and I had always wondered about the psychological scars they likely had. Our first course readings were *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*, by Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who works with veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In his introduction to *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay discusses his motivation for writing: “I have a specific aim in doing this: to promote a public attitude of *caring* about the conditions that create such psychological injuries, an attitude that will support measures to prevent as much psychological injury as possible” (xiii). Like me, Shay values the cultivation of social awareness and empathy. I appreciated this and devoured his books and other powerful course texts such as Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. These works taught me much about narrative style, modes of description, etc., but these rhetorical elements paled in comparison to what I *really* learned: I discovered the horror and prevalence of PTSD, the social isolation of our veterans, and our government’s shameful neglect of them. These discoveries profoundly affected me on both intellectual and emotional levels, and I instantly realized

the curriculum’s significance and desired its integration into my own classroom. Of relevance here is Jim Burke’s foreword to Luke Reynolds’ book, *A Call to Creativity: Reading, Writing, and Inspiring Students in an Age of Standardization*, where he writes, “I once heard Alfie Kohn speak, and during that talk, he discussed the idea of the 10-year test, which he explained by simply asking: What, of all you teach on any given day, will kids remember in 10 years?” (ix). I believe this test should be applied not only to our students but to ourselves as well. We must honor those things that confound and engross our minds and hearts. I was certain this content would pass my own “10-year test,” and I suspected it would pass my students’ tests as well. To confirm this suspicion, I had to examine my students, the next educational pillar, to ascertain if my potential curriculum would be pertinent to them as well.

Meeting Students Where They Are

PS.ELA.9-12.2 Students are treated as stakeholders in the educational process, as featured curricula reflect their interests, values, and cultural backgrounds.

The CCSS could potentially create an oppressive milieu in which students are entirely supplanted by “The Standards.” At worst, when subjected to standardization, individual identity recedes as students are abstracted into test scores and other measures of data. At best, students remain nonparticipants in the educational process. Alfie Kohn, in “How to Create Nonreaders,” writes:

When parents ask, “What did you do in school today?”, kids often respond, “Nothing.” Howard Gardner pointed out that they’re probably right, because “typically school is *done to* students.” [8] This sort of enforced passivity is particularly characteristic of classrooms where students are excluded from any role in shaping the curriculum, where they’re on the receiving end of lectures and questions, assignments and assessments.

To discourage such exclusion, we must establish a meaningful curriculum by privileging our students’ values, interests, and cultural contexts. Such an acknowledgment, however, does not mean we neglect our own curricular goals. Rather, we

must locate the ideological space where teacher and students meet.

To locate this space, I examined my students, their school culture, and their local community. Our student population is incredibly diverse, and a sizable portion is consistently interested in military service. Additionally, our superb JROTC program enrolls many students each year, so I knew this particular population existed in our school. Regarding the outside community, there are numerous active and retired military members in the area, and many students have family members and friends with military experience. After evaluating all of this, I decided that my new “trauma curriculum” would be pertinent to my students as it would not only expose them to a darker side of military experience (particularly valuable to those considering service), but it would also help students empathize with veterans in the community. Significantly, my curricular evaluation contrasts the uniform, detached CCSS; my assessment of potential curriculum was done with my *specific* school’s population and social context in mind, and this approach reflects Mike Rose’s view “of education as a complex lived experience . . . it all takes place *someplace* with its history and culture, its economic and political context” (*Lives* 246–47). I had identified a powerful, personalized curriculum, and students who could benefit from it, but there still remained one pillar to examine: the text.

Extending the Reader’s Gaze

PS.ELA.9-12.3 Text is a relevant, invitational medium that students examine through various lenses and construct multiple meanings from; reading involves a balance of close analysis, text-to-self connections, and text-to-world connections.

Text, the final pillar, must be positioned as a pliable medium receptive to evocative student engagement. As stated previously, the CCSS have endorsed text-dependent analysis at the expense of transactional, personally relevant reading. Former NCTE president Joanne Yatvin comments on this: “Nowhere in the standards is there any attempt to link student learning to the real world in real time. . . . This is the standards’ fatal flaw: They are a set of academic exercises without any real-world

applications.” One way to counter this, and encourage a deeper engagement, is to have students apply “lenses,” or critical theories, such as reader response or sociological criticism, to text. Reading in this manner links text to the present, stimulates divergent thinking, and teaches students that meaning is generated by the reader.

PTSD, *Macbeth*, and *The Things They Carried*: An Uncommon Curriculum

When viewing text through a conceptual lens, students alter the work, and reading becomes personalized as the text unveils whatever the student seeks. Additionally, the text can become the space in which teacher and student interests intersect. In my case, I created a personal curriculum (my “trauma curriculum”), determined its inclusion would benefit my students, and located an applicable text to serve as the focus for this curricular lens. In my English IV Honors class, *Macbeth* became this text, and viewing it from this perspective caused students to learn about PTSD and cultivate empathy. Additionally, I was able to teach Shakespeare in a more pertinent, balanced fashion. Students still learned about dramatic literary devices and other text-based features, but *Macbeth* also became fused to their own lives. As a result, the text, with all of its literary complexity and canonical weight, did not displace my students. To further acknowledge them, I accommodated students’ requests for more contemporary literature by assigning Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* as their outside reading. O’Brien, a Vietnam veteran, wrote much in this book about the challenges of coping with trauma.

To begin our unit, I framed it with a question: “What types of emotional burdens do people carry?” Students responded in a journal where they referenced burdens carried by both themselves and others. After engaging them, I introduced our first text: a factsheet about PTSD from the US Department of Veteran Affairs, and accompanying this text was another question, “What are the effects of carrying emotional burdens?” Students responded by annotating and referencing many of the symptoms

Students still learned about dramatic literary devices and other text-based features, but *Macbeth* also became fused to their own lives.

explained in the PTSD booklet, and some commented on the related struggles of friends and family members. After it was evident they understood the disorder, I introduced them to our unit works, *Macbeth* and *The Things They Carried*, and explained that we would be discussing soldiers, their traumatic experiences, and PTSD during our reading. Students then received a double-column organizer in which they maintained an ongoing record of trauma and symptoms of PTSD from both works (pertinent quotes on one side and symptoms on the other). Significantly, students were fully engaged as they observed Macbeth's initial traumatic experience when he "carved" his path to Macdonwald, "unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps, And fix'd his head upon our battlements" (1.2.22–23), and their intellectual and emotional investment grew as they discussed Macbeth's erratic behavior following Duncan's murder (emotional distress from trauma), his hallucinations during the banquet after Banquo's murder (anxiety and flashback), and his psychological deterioration after Lady Macbeth's death (survivor's guilt). Throughout the unit, we also discussed O'Brien's masterful work and the ways in which characters used narrative to mitigate the psychological burdens of combat trauma. Toward the unit's conclusion, students composed an essay in which they referenced their double-column organizer, analyzed the presence of PTSD in one of the literary works, and discussed how a specific character effectively, or ineffectively, managed emotional distress. Students also wrote about how their perception of veterans had been altered by their reading and discussion. Finally, I closed our study with a guest speaker: a pilot who flew combat and troop transport missions in Vietnam, and who also adored Tim O'Brien's work. On the day of his visit, each student came prepared with a question relatable to both the text and the experiences of our speaker. When he talked with us, his weathered copy of *The Things They Carried* clasp'd in his hands, we inhabited an intersection of past, present, fiction, and reality while participating in a valuable conversation measured not by a standardized test score, but by the depth of the emotional and intellectual imprints it left behind.


This unit balanced the pillars of teacher, student, and text, and it serves as a curricular model derived not from mandated standards, but from an

educator and his students; it concluded not with standardized assessment, but with meaningful analysis and conversation. Further, this unit foregrounded *both* the literal and emotional resonances of the featured texts, and my students inscribed as much meaning into their readings as they extracted from them. All of this was framed by mandated standards, and while never supplanted, they were acknowledged, at times, only implicitly. That said, I am not advocating the vehement rejection of the CCSS; not all of the standards' effects are negative. Students have sharpened their evidence-based writing and reading skills, but the extensive promotion of these abilities has marginalized others. Ultimately, the standards have circumscribed not only reading instruction but ELA curriculum as a whole.

The CCSS are closely linked to high-stakes testing, and it is no coincidence that the text-centric analysis promoted by the standards readily lends itself to standardized assessment. These tests do not prompt students to connect text to life, or to consider how language has informed their view of the world. Such questions are inherently subjective, and their answers resist quantification. These are, however, questions we should ask, as public schools



Former student Zoe McElya's depiction of the "Meaningful Education" folder that educators must continue to access.

must cultivate citizens who understand how language informs present circumstances so they may better participate in the debates that shape our society. Mandated standards, increased testing, and the denigration of the teaching profession threaten such meaningful pedagogy, but I believe Personal Standards and other subversive acts provide means to resist. Martha Craven Nussbaum speaks of the importance of infusing education with “the spirit of the humanities,” which she describes as “searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in” (7). I hope that educational mandates will eventually promote these things, but until then, educators must continue creating Personal Standards, prioritizing student interests and values, and incorporating relevant texts that inspire both cognitive and emotional engagement. Perhaps, one day, these will no longer be considered acts of subterfuge. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

This lesson pairs reading and discussion of Tim O’Brien’s story “The Things They Carried” with a letter-writing activity intended to help students develop the empathy needed to be insightful readers and to give students the opportunity to examine the symbolic weights they carry and, in turn, create meaningful, dynamic, and publishable prose. Students begin by listing all the things they carry, both literal and symbolic, and then think about the symbolic weight of these items. Next, after discussing O’Brien’s story and how some of the things listed in the story reveal character, they return to their lists to add anything they may have forgotten. They next write about three of the most significant weights they carry from their lists, describing the items and their importance to them. Finally, students write a letter to someone with whom they can share the weight of one of these things they carry. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/worth-weight-letter-writing-1061.html>