

# Foreword



*Whither Common Core?* As I write, this is a very live question. A confluence of factors has brought intense criticism—some of it substantive, some of it political—on the provenance, process, and implementation of the Standards. So, while the idea of national standards remains a sound one, as the authors here note, the devil is in the implementation details. And ironically (given the emphasis on the aim of dispassionate argument in the Standards), polemics are currently drowning out sound reasoning.

That is why Michael, Deborah, and Jeff have done the profession a great service in this book. Finally! A text with more light than heat on the issues surrounding the Standards and their implications for learning. We come to understand through their clear and well-documented analysis precisely what the Standards do and do not imply for practice, and we gain endless practical advice on how to use the Standards to make intelligent progress in literacy development.

With regard to dispassionate argument, the authors provide readers with a fair and helpful account of the ebb and flow of views about reading over the past 75 years and how those views have played into the English language arts (ELA) Standards. Here, for example, are the authors lamenting how the important advance of reader-response theory nonetheless led to excess (see pages 29–30):

Lois Tyson (2006) reminds us that “the New Critics believed that the timeless meaning of the text—what the text is—is contained in the text alone” (p. 170). Reader-response critics contend that “what a text is cannot be separated from what it does” (p. 170). The role of the reader, then, and how he or she

responds to any particular text, cannot be separated from our understanding of the text itself. . . .

Yet in some ways, as a profession, we overcorrected. In some cases we threw the text out with the bathwater, leaving some pretty sloppy practices that encourage personal revelation at the expense of textual interpretation. . . . As English teachers, we may have been guilty of overprivileging and romanticizing the individual at the expense of considerations of context and text.

But their even-handed history is merely a backdrop for a forceful argument as to what kind of instruction best supports the Standards. The authors clearly show how close reading—a performance at the heart of the Standards—is helped, not hurt, by the appropriate use of valid comprehension strategies and reader-response activities that involve pre-reading questions, discussions, and surveys that assist in meaning making. Why is this important? Because the chief author of the Standards—David Coleman—has spoken out against such practices (even as he acknowledges his limited experience in teaching and with the research on literacy).

The authors are most astute in showing that Coleman's constant emphasis on text-dependent questions actually undercuts the aim of transfer—a goal that Coleman, the authors, and I all agree is crucial while too rarely achieved. The authors effectively marshal the evidence as well as common sense to show that burying one's nose in each text, in isolation, is highly unlikely to foster the kind of strategic thinking and connections across texts that transfer requires—to the additional detriment of likely decreases in student engagement.

They remind us that transfer demands metacognition and the ability to (consciously) apply powerful strategies to new texts:

What research on transfer teaches us is that students must have conscious control over what they will transfer and plenty of practice in doing so. Research on classroom discourse teaches us that the asking of authentic questions that foster open discussion among students, discussions in which they

can hear and evaluate multiple interpretations, is associated with improved performance on complex literacy tasks.

What makes the book a must-have for every teacher is that the authors never rest content in merely making these kinds of academic arguments. Each chapter is filled with clear, practical, and rich examples for how teachers might honor “best practice” while also meeting the Standards. In each chapter we see best practice modeled and discussed in a way that will help all teachers, novice and veteran, be more effective teachers of reading.

In sum, this is a book that represents the best in teacher education and professional development: a seamless melding of theory and practice, argument, and advice. The book practices what the writing standards preach and helps us experience directly what the reading standards demand. In short: an anchor text for the anchor standards.

—*Grant Wiggins*

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