

Experiencing the Common Core

Carol Iannone

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Judging from the Conservative Political Action Conference held in Washington, D.C., earlier this year, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), pro and con, will be an issue in the 2015–2016 presidential campaign or, at the very least, in the Republican primaries. Most of the contenders for the Republican nomination who were questioned on the subject at the conference vehemently oppose the standards, including Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Rick Perry, Bobby Jindal, Scott Walker, and Ben Carson. But Jeb Bush, who put the standards into effect during his tenure as governor of Florida, stands staunchly in support of them and he has the backing of some prominent conservatives, including former Secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan, William Bennett.

So much has been said and written about the standards, usually in fairly general terms, but how do they translate into actual textbooks that actual teachers must use? The Pearson Education Group together with Prentice Hall has produced CCSS-based K–12 literature readers, among many other CCSS-based textbooks. This article takes a look at the teacher’s edition of the eleventh-grade reader in that series, published in 2012, which has been adopted in at least one state, and which has some good features and many deficits, most though not all of which are related to the CCSS.

Carol Iannone is editor-at-large of *Academic Questions*, 8 West 38th Street, Suite 503, New York, NY 10018-6229; iannone@nas.org.

Instruction for Instructors

It has to be said, the first impression you get from perusing the two volumes of the teacher's version of *The American Experience, Common Core Edition*—after overcoming your astonishment at their combined ten pounds-plus weight—is what a confusion their pages present.¹ First of all, it is a book within a book. The student reader is incorporated into the teacher's edition, centered top on the 9x11-inch pages, and then, surrounding the student reader, itself fairly busy, is a blizzard of sidebars and underbars and inserts and various sets of instructions and proposed questions (with proposed answers) and assessment measures and writing assignments and preparation exercises and background information and thought experiments and group discussion ideas and further task suggestions, and more—all in different shapes and sizes and fonts and colors and groupings.

Each of the five hundred or so readings, plus the pages of student exercises, is accompanied by copious instructions to the teacher on how to teach it. If a selection is spread out over a number of pages, and many are, each page will have a different assortment of the various categories of instruction, many but not all of which are tied to the standards, more than could be explored in fifty years of teaching.²

In addition, the first volume begins with about 130 pages of frontal material, some for the students and some for the teacher only, and between the student sections in both volumes are swaths of pages with additional pedagogical instruction for the teacher. The student edition, too, has pages of fairly extensive background information. For the teacher, charts key the seventy or so CCSS to the readings, practically page by page, and each reading to the CCSS page by page, to differentiated levels of student ability page by page, and to the skills each reading will develop, and some of these charts are keyed to yet other books and rubrics.³ The student readers are about seven hundred pages each and with

¹Prentice Hall and Grant Wiggins et al., *Prentice Hall Literature: The American Experience, Common Core Edition*, teacher's ed., 2 vols. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2012).

²Some of the running heads and subheads surrounding the student text include: Differentiated Instruction—Special Needs, Less Proficient, English Learners, Advanced, Gifted/Talented; Reader and Task Suggestions; Text Complexity Rubric; Critical Viewing; Reading Strategy; Literary Analysis; About the Selection; Activating Prior Knowledge; Assessment Practice; Assessment Resources; Think About; Concept Connector; Reading Check; Spiral Review; Visual Connections; Professional Development; Standards Mastery; Culturally Responsive Instruction; Vocabulary Development; Teaching from Technology; Extend the Lesson; and many more.

³Some of the companion books include *Professional Development Guidebook*, *Unit Resources*, *Graphic Organizer Transparencies*, *Reader's Notebook*, *Reading Kit*, and *Common Core Companion*.

the extra allotment of instructor pages, each volume is a thousand pages or more, this for one year of work in one subject.

Frankly, you wonder at first if these tomes have been compiled by people who hate books and want you to hate them, too. It's difficult even to work physically with such burdensome compilations; you almost forget that we read from left to right. Plus, the whole process of reading seems reversed: instead of letting a piece of writing come alive, the textbook loads it down in advance, making what should be the relatively pleasant task of reading and teaching literature into an overwhelmingly bureaucratized chore.

The opening pages feature photographs of the sixteen text editors, or "authors," as they are called, those who "guided the direction and philosophy of Pearson Prentice Hall Literature" along with the Pearson Prentice Hall "development team."⁴ Some of the authors highlight aspects of the CCSS approach to teaching reading and writing. These aspects include the unobjectionable—the value of rereading, rewriting, reading aloud, for example—and the questionable—do teachers really need to "validate" the cultures of their "English Language Learners" (ELL)? Wouldn't it be better just to make sure they learn English, as so many children learned in the past, even when the United States was at war with their countries of origin?

Another key feature of the CCSS is the new accent on "information." Instruction in English via CCSS now consists of half literature and half what are called "informational texts," which can include but go beyond traditional literary nonfiction, the essays of Emerson, for example, to such items as government reports and social science studies. The reading standards are equally divided, ten and ten, into those for literature and those for informational texts, and in many ways the two sets are quite similar.⁵ For CCSS proponents, we are told, the "prevailing literary curriculum needs to shift from a focus on developing reading skills and building fluency with simple narratives, toward reading and writing to gain knowledge and express new understandings with informational text."⁶ One could puzzle over that statement for some time, wondering if it really sounds like progress, as with English class now being about "Locating, evaluating, integrating, and communicating information."⁷ Is this what the study of literature and language is for?

⁴Prentice Hall et al., *American Experience*, 1:CC22.

⁵An eleventh Reading Standard for Literature (RL.11) is noted in some places by number but is not listed on the CCSS chart at the front of the textbook.

⁶William G. Brozo, "The Role of Content Literacy in an Effective RTI Program," *Reading Teacher* 64, no. 2 (October 2010): 147–50, as cited in Prentice Hall et al., *American Experience*, 1:CC20.

⁷Donald J. Leu, as cited in Prentice Hall et al., *American Experience*, 1:CC20.

This is one of education expert Sandra Stotsky's chief complaints about CCSS. Author of the highly praised and effective Massachusetts K–12 standards, which are far more detailed with regard to literature, Stotsky was on the Common Core Validation Committee but refused to sign onto the final product. She insists that no research supports CCSS claims for the value of teaching informational texts. In fact, Stotsky maintains, imaginative literature—fiction, drama, poetry—imparts greater critical and discerning skills, and its decline in the curriculum over recent decades has contributed to student deficiencies on standardized tests such as the SAT.

Furthermore, the CCSS claim to produce college and career readiness, while opponents maintain that those goals actually contradict each other. Aside from at times being rather poorly written, some of the standards do seem fairly minimal. For example, the Grade 11 Reading Standards for Literature, RL.1, and Reading Standards for Informational Texts, RI.1, happen to be the same (as is the case with one other pair, not a good sign from the literary point of view) and seem to state the fairly obvious, while also being a syntactical fright: “Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.”⁸

Still, given all that has contributed to the deterioration of lower education in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, from the advancement of dubious radical pedagogies to the degeneration of schools of education into useless if not pernicious theorizing, and so on, one can understand why some conservatives and traditionalists are impressed with the standards' explicitness about basic skills. For example, the writing standards call for command of Standard English and correct spelling, things that might simply have been assumed requirements years ago, but in an age that has given rise to apologiae for “Ebonics” and composition theories such as Students' Right to Their Own Language and translingualism, they do need to be emphasized again. Likewise, mandating the citation of textual evidence is useful, given that many college students in recent years have come up thinking that impressions and simple responses to a reading (“what I got out of it”) are sufficient.

But in these and other points, we are talking about only a basic level of reading and writing proficiency, not exactly college preparation, at least as traditionally understood. For that, the standards set much store on getting students to read (and write about) increasingly difficult texts. The RL.10 of the literature standards and

⁸Prentice Hall et al., *American Experience*, 1:CC78–79.

RI.10 of the informational text standards both insist that students be able to read and comprehend “literature” and “literary nonfiction,” respectively, “in the grades 11-CCR [*Common Core Reader*] text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.” (Truly “informational texts” can be used to address other standards.)

The text complexity band evaluates each reading according to a formula, the “Text Complexity Multi-Index,” in which “four comprehensive measures and considerations are taken into account to determine a text’s appropriateness for a student or group of students.”⁹ The four parts of the model

expand upon the Common Core State Standards’ three-part model for measuring text complexity. A critical component of both models is that qualitative measures and reader-task considerations are balanced with quantitative measures to achieve an overall text complexity recommendation. By measuring text complexity, both quantitative and qualitative, teachers can challenge students to read more complex texts as they move toward college and career readiness.¹⁰

At any rate, here is where the standards grow almost unbearably onerous, in how the teacher must apply them, coordinating the different charts, the different levels of instruction for different levels of readers, the different text complexities, the different required skills, the different support tasks, and testing and evaluating the students at different levels, while providing the “scaffolding,” the additional help where needed and as proffered in the many boxes, charts, and pages of instruction. The Guide to Selected Level Resources charts in the teacher edition are mainly concerned with Tier 1 (students performing on level, although in other places Tier 1 includes advanced) and Tier 2 (students requiring intervention). Tier 3, special needs, including dyslexia and special education, “may require consultation” with those students’ specialists. But on the selection pages, aside from additional instruction for those levels, there is also instruction for ELL, advanced, and, here and there, gifted and talented. The Guide to Selected Level Resources charts also use a symbol system to indicate what tasks are to involve one-on-one teaching, group work, whole class instruction, independent work, and assessment.

For example, in the charts that schematize the readings according to their fulfillment of the standards, the Mark Twain section, which includes “The Boy’s

⁹Ibid., 1:CC16.

¹⁰Ibid.

Ambition,” an excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*, and the short story “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” will satisfy/address:

in the Reading Standards for Literature:

RL.6: Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

RL.9: Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

And in the Reading Standards for Informational Texts:

RI.4 [presumably because the *Life* excerpt is literary nonfiction, therefore an informational text in the broadest sense]: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text.

Plus:

Vocabulary [Language Standards]: L.4, L.4b, L.4.c, L.5, L.5.b
Grammar/Writing: W.2, W.2.a, W.2.b, W.2.f, L.1

And then, on the pages of the readings, each reading is assessed on three measures for the level of text complexity it presents on a qualitative scale of 1 to 5. So for *Life*, “context/knowledge demands” are a 3, “structure/language, conventionality and clarity” 4, and “levels of meaning/purpose/concept level” 3. The reading is also quantitatively assessed for “lexile” (word and syntactical difficulty) and number of words, and then is judged “more complex” or “more accessible,” the latter being the case with *Life*. For “Frog,” judged “more complex,” the breakdown of the three categories is 4, 4, and 3.

The teacher must find a way to pitch each reading differently for each level, and provide the “scaffolding” where needed. For below-level readers, for example, the task might be simply to read for content; for on-level readers, to

consider content and “multiple perspectives”; and for advanced readers, to work with “multiple perspectives.” The leveled tasks and suggestions will change from reading to reading. The student pages following each reading include questions keyed to the standards, according to, mainly, Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas.

In addition to all this, most of the readings are accompanied by detailed lesson plans, called “Lesson Pacing Guides” (which come under the rubric Common Core Time and Resources Manager). Here is a synopsis of the guide for the excerpt from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, one of the “more complex” texts, rating 3, 4, and 5 on the three qualitative measures. Most of the directives are linked to the CCSS by being prefaced with the Common Core logo (CC in a circle), but some directives are evidently not Common Core, at least not for this reading.

On day 1, the teacher will “preteach” by handing out Reading and Vocabulary Warm-ups from one of the supplemental texts (*Unit 2 Resources*), discussing the relevant Literary Analysis concepts, as well as the Reading Strategy, the author and Background information, and the Essential Questions. (There are three Essential Questions on the nature of American literature that run throughout the textbooks.)

On day 2–3, the teacher will “preteach/teach/assess” by handing out graphic organizers for Literary Analysis and Reading Strategy from another of the supplemental books (*Graphic Organizer Transparencies*), using the Activating Prior Knowledge activities, having students read and checking their comprehension with Reading Check, using the Literary Analysis and Reading Strategy prompts, going over Vocabulary notes, getting students to answer Critical Reading, Literary Analysis, and Reading Strategy questions, having students do the Vocabulary Lesson.

On day 4, the teacher will Extend/Assess by having students do the Convention and Style Lesson and the Writing Lesson, perhaps assigning a character study as homework, and administering one of two tests from *Unit 2 Resources*.¹¹

The teacher needs also to keep in mind the particular standards that are being exemplified in each section; for *Moby Dick*: RL.1 and 2, governing textual support and central idea (although, puzzlingly, only RL.2 is listed in the Skills Navigator chart at the front of the book in the teacher material); and W.1: “Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence”; and W.1.a: “Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s),

¹¹“Lesson Guide,” in Prentice Hall et al., *American Experience*, 1:334a. Due to the publisher’s unusually broad copyright claims, paraphrase substitutes for direct quotation here.

distinguish the claim(s) from alternative or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.”¹² In addition, the textbook notes that additional standards practice can be found in the student workbook, *Common Core Companion*, and gives the relevant pages.

And since, in the case of *Moby Dick*, only two Reading Literature Standards and two Writing standards are addressed, the teacher will have to be sure to choose other readings that activate the other standards, of which there are, as stated above, over seventy, covering/addressing Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. (Admittedly, many govern smaller matters of grammar and punctuation, but those things have to be taught and checked, too.)

What about the work as literature? While it can't be said that the textbook neglects the aesthetic, moral, and even spiritual dimensions of literature entirely, it flattens and schematizes them as well, and, given all the tasks teachers must fulfill and the needs they must address, one wonders how they can be adequately discussed in the time available.

Questions that run alongside the text in the student edition with suggested answers in the teacher's edition are categorized as Critical Reading, Reading Strategy, and Literary Analysis. While critical reading and reading strategy are more about discerning what is happening in a text, that can't be entirely separated from a literary analysis, of course. But the Literary Analysis questions are meant to be more in the nature of literary criticism.

For the eighteen or so pages of the *Moby Dick* selection, there are perhaps a couple of dozen questions. Here are some examples:

Reading Strategy question (Identifying Details to Determine Essential Message) [after checking students' comprehension of a certain passage]: What important details in his environment does Ahab fail to notice? Answer [teacher's edition]: Ahab fails to notice Starbuck's foreboding tone, a laugh, and the winds.¹³

Literary Analysis (Symbol) question [after writing on the board the words and phrases regarding the wind in a certain passage to be read aloud]: What does the wind symbolize to Ahab? Answer: The wind symbolizes the maddening, sometimes ineffable, noble, and glorious power of nature. He

¹²Prentice Hall et al., *American Experience*, 1:CC80.

¹³Ibid, 1:CC342.

absolves it of malice, however, unlike *Moby Dick*. [*Moby Dick* does not absolve the wind of malice? Or Ahab does not absolve *Moby Dick* of malice? Of course it's the latter, but the syntax is ambiguous.]¹⁴

Critical Reading questions actually turn into Critical Viewing (of the illustrations) and Critical Thinking questions in this section. A Critical Thinking (Speculate) question in this section suggests reading a passage aloud and asking students what they think will happen next.

The students are also asked further questions in their exercise pages in the reader.

Many of the questions are good, some less so, but, again, it is the sense of the instructor being drilled down and controlled practically to the jot and tittle that is dismaying. The textbook clearly does not trust that the teacher might lead a class discussion in which such insights could naturally emerge.

The Essential Questions are three questions that are reprised for most readings: What makes American literature American? What is the relationship between literature and place? How does literature shape or reflect society?

In the *Moby Dick* excerpt, regarding the first question, What makes American literature American? the textbook asks, "What particularly American elements do you see in Melville's account of the quest for the white whale?"¹⁵

And gives this Possible Response: "Students may note that the cultural diversity of the crew seems American, as does Ahab's driving ambition and the crew's responsiveness to offers of financial reward."¹⁶

Why does this seem inadequate?

Everything but the Kitchen Sink

After the confusing presentation and the extraordinarily jargon-laden schematization of teacher and student tasks, the next thing you may notice about these tomes is the sudden breaks in subject matter. For example, the section on the Puritans in the New World is followed by excerpts from a blog on the exploration of Mars. An excerpt from Benjamin Franklin's autobiography leads into that of a contemporary memoirist, Sandra Cisneros. The Civil War section is

¹⁴Ibid., 1:CC345.

¹⁵Ibid., 1:CC352.

¹⁶Ibid.

rounded off with an extended excerpt from the screenplay of the recent film *Cold Mountain*, about two women helping each other survive during that conflict. The Fireside Poets, with their tripartite nomenclature—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—prompts a comparison to Hispanic surnames. The section on Native American myths is followed by Susan Power’s modern essay “Museum Indians.” You’re in the eighteenth century but suddenly learning about the League of Women Voters and how to watch a political debate. Not only are we not allowed to let the work speak to us, due to the enormous amount of supplemental material and the constant need to align to the standards and the many measures and categories, we are also not allowed to dwell in the past but are constantly being jerked into the present and present-day concerns.

Some of this is not a bad idea—a chart in the Edgar Allen Poe section updating the Gothic to current practitioners such as Stephen King, for example—but most of it is simply to meet the demands of multiculturalism and diversity in the readings and to satisfy contemporary interests and preoccupations. Excerpts from Thoreau’s *Walden* spill into environmentalism, for example, complete with a drawing of a water treatment plant, an EPA publication on where drinking water comes from, and a 2007 South Florida Environmental Report on the Kissimmee River Restoration and Upper Basin Initiatives. Some readings will break into boxed inserts on economics or anthropology. The second volume ends with a U.S. Census Bureau publication, “Demographic Aspects of Surnames from Census 2000.” There are sections on cartoons, media, entertainment, popular culture, technology, legal reasoning, and various academic vocabularies, for example, in mathematics and social studies.

By the by you wonder if this is English class, or civics, or history, or science, or social science. Prefaces in the student reader give selective background on American history with a liberal/multicultural slant, and modern-day authors are inserted to comment on some of the writers and periods. Even aside from the huge girth of the volumes, there is a mind-boggling sense of simply trying to do much too much.

No, it isn’t all bad. As can be discerned from the discussion above, there are many selections from classic American literature that those over fifty will recognize from their own grammar and high school studies, although there is an enormous reliance on excerpts. Many short stories are featured in their entirety, however. The frontal materials include useful sections on vocabulary, roots, prefixes, suffixes, etymology, argumentation, logical fallacies, rhetorical strategies, and more. No doubt conservatives are impressed in the Informational Standards by RI.8, calling for knowledge of “seminal U.S. texts.” The examples given are “U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents” (a little

ambitious for eleventh grade, one might think), *The Federalist*, and presidential addresses. And by RI.9, which calls for knowledge of “seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address).” Amazingly, even with its hundreds of pages, our reader does not contain all of these.

Moreover, the student pages are generally more appealing than in the teacher edition, with sections on vocabulary, language, literary history, literary terms, and also maps, timelines, illustrations, reproductions of paintings related to the readings, insertions on music, museums, and other topics. The exercise pages are ugly, however—chilly, clinical, tedious, and confusing. But part of what a reader is supposed to do is select, and while the CCSS reader has selected, it has selected too much, leaving a teacher to puzzle about what to teach. As critics protested at the first demands for multicultural representation in the curriculum, there are only so many hours in the day, the week, the semester, the school year, and by including hundreds of readings that cover the gamut of diversity concerns—over and above the important literature itself—the authors have created a whole overcome by the sum of the parts.

Furthermore, the insistence on giving equal, proportional representation to diversity means losing emphasis, despite the running attention to the three Essential Questions. Or perhaps that *is* the emphasis—American literature as the launching pad for inclusiveness, diversity, multiculturalism, environmentalism, feminism, and so on. That is perhaps the “American experience,” according to these authors.

And one can’t help challenging what selections have been made. Remove some of the contemporary insertions and assign instead a complete Hawthorne novel. Why an excerpt from Jonathan Edwards’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” and not from John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity,” with its luminous “city on a hill” reference, to which two twentieth-century presidents made significant allusion?¹⁷ Patrick Henry and Tom Paine argue for independence but Washington’s Farewell Address makes clear how independence and self-government are sustained. Since the textbook lays such emphasis on how Native Americans aided the colonists, why no Fenimore Cooper? And one of the truly egregious crimes of the textbook is confining

¹⁷The background material in the student edition does mention the phrase, but does not give the context and later references.

the extraordinary Willa Cather to the short, atypical story “A Wagner Matinée,” about the same importance given to mediocre Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour,” both fitting the feminist theme running through the textbook about the limitations on women’s lives.

For all the background and support material *The American Experience* provides, you never get a straightforward explication of the American Founding, and what made it exceptional, although there is plenty about slavery and Native Americans. America seems to be a city without foundations. The textbook also seems to suggest that reason eclipsed faith in the course of American history, but that is exactly what Melville, and Hawthorne, too, were challenging.

For literary content, the standards demand only some knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century “foundational” works, which does mean classic texts for the most part, if not necessarily very much of them; plus Shakespeare (evidently the teacher will have to find a way to fit that into the American experience, perhaps to contrast with seventeenth-century American poetry; the frontal material does include a Shakespeare sonnet); and a play by an American author. This is satisfied by the longest entry by far in both volumes, *The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller (called a “legend” in the textbook), and the only full-length work the students will read.

The Crucible is about the outbreak of accusations of witchcraft against many individuals in seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts, and is directly meant by Miller to characterize and parallel efforts by the United States Congress in the late 1940s and 1950s to expose Communists and Communist sympathizers in American life and institutions—the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the Senate hearings headed by Joseph McCarthy. The section on the play plus background plus supplemental material on the latter-day “witch-hunts” of the 1940s and 1950s runs over 150 pages, including teacher inserts—each act is given a Lesson Pacing Guide—and an excerpt from the screenplay of the 2005 George Clooney film *Good Night and Good Luck*, based on the career of Edward R. Murrow, the journalist who challenged McCarthy on live television.

But you never get to understand World War II and the Cold War and what Communism really meant in the lives of those forced to live under it, and how the Soviet Union conducted its own far worse witch-hunts and maintained a vast and punitive gulag for political dissenters. Even more of an outrage, you never learn about the existence of the extensive network of Communist spies, domestic and foreign, in America during the Cold War, including at high levels of government, as recently revealed in official documents released after the fall of the Berlin Wall. (As black power activist turned conservative Eldridge

Cleaver eventually declared, “There *were* Communists under the bed.”) No, the worst thing about the Cold War was anticommunism and McCarthyism, and the “information” that the student will derive from the reader’s only full-length work is basically left-wing propaganda.

Why does this seem inadequate?