Guest Column

On "Learning to Read"

EVELYNE ENDER AND DEIDRE SHAUNA LYNCH

THE THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES FEATURE OF THIS ISSUE OF *PMLA* contains a cluster of essays devoted to the subject of reading. At a time when many states in the United States are in the throes of a major public-education reform designed to prepare better-educated, more literate citizens for tomorrow's world, we collected these essays in the belief that scholars belonging to the MLA might be interested in reflecting on this effort in the light of their research. Hence our title, "Learning to Read," and our appeal to our contributors to consider what they, with their scholarly expertise and pedagogical experience, might contribute to the charged debates about the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI)—debates that remind us of the high stakes involved in training good readers. We hope that *PMLA* readers will agree with us that the question of how the architects of the Common Core have defined the uses and measures of literacy education affects much of the MLA membership—professors, adjuncts, and graduate instructors alike.

For some years now, test results have indicated that American schoolchildren read more poorly than many of their peers abroad (Heitin). A distinctive feature of the Common Core (the shorthand title for an extraordinary effort to align educational requirements and standards nationwide) lies in its effort to devise a graduated progression in the standards for the English language arts (ELA) that is anchored in the skills of close reading. Given that the changes in teaching objectives defined and prescribed by the standards might transform the way children in America learn to make sense of the written word, it is only natural that our professional body would respond. The decisive, and some might say aggressive, manner in which the architects of the Common Core have recast the fundamentals of the ELA has provoked strong reactions, not only among

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K–12 teachers but also in higher education. Concerns were voiced early on in sessions at MLA conventions starting in 2013, and those conversations have continued on *MLA Commons* (e.g., Ferguson).

With the echoes of such exchanges in our minds and with the encouragement of the *PMLA* editor, Simon Gikandi, we tried to conceive of a space for a more meditative exchange, based on scholarship devoted to reading—scholarship initially conceived in academia. Distance, we thought, might help clarify the stakes of a reform that starts with a revolution in how young students, once they have acquired the basic tools of literacy, are taught to make sense of texts. An academic perspective might lead also to a richer understanding of what gains and losses the CCSSI's systematized—some would say excessively systematized—approach to reading might bring in its train. To host such a conversation seems all the more important since reading is a central investigative instrument and the foundation for critical thinking.

Indeed, the architects of the Common Core, the most vocal of whom is David Coleman, advocate a method designed to serve across domains: for literature and beyond, "history/social studies, science, and technical subjects" and secondarily for approaches to new media. The introduction to the standards outlines the architects' bold vision for the ELA:

> The skills and knowledge captured in the ELA/literacy standards are designed to prepare students for life outside the classroom. They include critical-thinking skills and the ability to closely and attentively read texts in a way that will help them understand and enjoy complex works of literature. Students will learn to use cogent reasoning and evidence collection skills that are essential for success in college, career, and life. The standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person who is prepared for success in the 21st century.
>
> ("English Language Arts Standards")

For many pieces in our collection, the standards constitute a subtext or, in some cases, the central reference point. The quotation above illustrates the ambitious scope of the CCSSI and highlights the emphasis (or pressure) it puts on the act of and aptitude for reading "closely and attentively," or even, as David Steiner puts it in his piece, "forensically." The statement promises enhanced enjoyment of literature as well as preparation "for life outside the classroom"—to be obtained by means of a textual approach that, one infers, has been geared to the needs of an information age. In the practical thrust and radical nature of this claim lie its strength and ambition: it evokes a global project. Reading becomes a means of access to a vast network of correlated texts that can serve, pragmatically, as a tool "for life." And it follows that for the architects of the Common Core reading needs to be reconceived from the ground up.

To this collection's one correspondent from abroad, Yves Citton (a scholar of the Enlightenment invested in modern-day questions), we owe the suggestion that the standards, in advocating attentiveness to texts and their interpretations, have the potential to promote a unique program of *Bildung*, of a sort that could foster a new kind of "computational subject."[1] This suggestion, and the fact that it originated with a scholar based in France, helped allay a doubt that we had at the outset of this project. A forum devoted to a reform designed to meet educational challenges facing schools in the United States might seem provincial or hegemonic to MLA members living elsewhere or working in languages other than English. Poorly performing readers who attend schools in impoverished cities and regions in the United States surely do not outnumber the children who are kept out of school to work in factories, mines, or armies in Asia and Africa or the girls worldwide who are denied schooling. However, an unexpected lesson we learned in our editorial work, albeit not one that all our authors meant to teach us,

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is that the comprehensive system for decoding texts and finding their "true meaning" that the CCSSI proposes may hold out the promise of a new program of global literacy. A method that is "based on skills rather than content" and that "can be adopted by millions of teachers in different settings," as Steiner puts it in his essay, has a democratic, universalist potential.[2] Indeed, the initial challenge of making sense of written words would appear to be the same for young learners who go to school in American cities and those who receive literacy instruction through their mobile phones because they "live in remote locations where there are no schools, teachers, or libraries" (Ally 2). The stakes of learning to read are equally important across the globe as the demand for cognitive labor increases in developing as well as advanced economies.

Still, in setting up this forum and issuing our invitations, we aimed to underscore the diversity of opinion in our discipline about what reading involves and requires. Accordingly, our thirteen authors bring to the subject of learning to read perspectives that derive, variously, from historical, cognitive, sociological, and literary approaches. Several pieces are theoretical or philosophical, illuminating the unresolved quandaries and limitations of close reading as conceived by the Common Core's architects. Some authors engage closely with the standards, whereas others leave them in the background of their remarks. John Guillory, Michael Holquist, and Steiner, in expanded versions of presentations that, at Margaret Ferguson's invitation, they gave at the 2015 MLA convention, present close analyses of the ELA standards that mirror the very method the standards advocate. Other authors offer responses that engage only obliquely with the Common Core's official documents, in essays that trace the long intellectual and pedagogical history that undergirds the efforts of this latest group of reformers. Yet another group proposes models of the reading process that diverge from the account of reading comprehension that is pivotal to the Common Core, and another explores what takes place, socially and psychologically, when reading occurs outside school. For all their diversity, these essays share preoccupations, which they address recurrently throughout these pages: "textual complexity" (the criterion by which students' proficiency in the ELA is to be measured); the Common Core's seemingly restrictive definition of close reading and the ways in which it minimizes the importance of contextual knowledge as an aspect of reading comprehension; the sidelining of affect and aesthetic pleasure in discussions of the standards; the opposition between information and imaginative writing that those discussions both assume and help institutionalize, one that seems, on close inspection, potentially problematic; and the prospect that this skills-driven approach to English will shunt fiction and poetry to the peripheries of the public school curriculum.

As a collection, these essays, though informed by diverse research projects, convince us that there might be ways of bridging the divide and fostering conversations between schools, on the one hand, and colleges and universities, on the other. Collectively, they help us imagine a constituency of teachers across the ranks cooperating to promote advanced literacy. They also suggest the value of conversations that would bring together theorists and practitioners, teachers and professors, researchers and visionaries around a burning issue—namely (borrowing a phrase from Geoffrey Hartman), "the fate of reading." But this reform targeting K–12 education, albeit managed mostly efficiently, seems already to have left college and university instructors on the sidelines, despite overlapping concerns. Our constituency seems, however, to have understood the significance of this reform. Why else, except for such shared concerns, would our authors have elected to attend to the intricate and arid documentation created by the CCSSI, when, as their

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essays indicate, their passions drive them toward imaginative, literary writings—toward Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton, John Ruskin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ezra Pound, Nikolay Gogol, Henry James, and Jean Racine—and also toward the ideas of Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold, Mikhail Bakhtin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, D. W. Winnicott, and the twentieth-century philosophers of mind?

Many of the American students whose education is currently being shaped by the standards will soon arrive in MLA members' classrooms. It will soon be incumbent on college and university instructors to accommodate those students' convictions about what readers are supposed to do with texts. That the literacy pedagogy of the Common Core, though it appears to revive the close-reading techniques associated with the New Criticism of the mid–twentieth century, may marginalize the imaginative writings that the New Critics cherished is of palpable concern in many of the essays here. For these reasons, it was perhaps inevitable that our question about the high stakes involved in training good readers would spark responses that took a self-reflexive turn. It prompted many of our contributors to scrutinize the assumptions about interpretation and about literature and literariness that shape contemporary criticism. After all, reading is at the heart of what we do. You are doing it now.

As we anticipated, close reading—the heterogeneous constellation of techniques that remains the foundation of much of the critical practice and classroom teaching in our discipline—is a pivotal topic in this cluster.[3] A few of our contributors remark approvingly on how the Common Core gives priority to attentive, precise, word-by-word parsing and note how the deference to the authority of the text that such an approach inculcates might helpfully counterbalance recent approaches that redirect students' attention from texts to contexts. Others remind us that close reading has a history. Stephen Arata, for instance, calls attention to its provenance in lectures that the Victorian critic John Ruskin gave in 1864. Arata proposes that the pedagogy promoted by the CCSSI is likely to be snagged by some of the same contradictions that snagged Ruskin in those lectures: there is something to be learned, accordingly, from the difficulties that Ruskin encounters when, for instance, he tries to enforce a distinction between valuable literature—which alone merits the close-grained parsing that Ruskin calls "true reading"—and information. Joshua Gang's essay likewise reckons with close reading's past, returning us to the prohibition on inferences about authorial intention that formed a cornerstone of the New Criticism—a prohibition that also, Gang complains, remains foundational for many contemporary modes of textual analysis. Following the exhortation to K–12 teachers to return to the text, Holquist and Steiner examine the standards' underlying philosophy and report on a forensic conception of reading that focuses on collecting evidence and building a case.

It also seemed that the very word *close* needed revisiting. How else can we explain the wealth of new adjectives and adverbs that our contributors install in front of *reading*? Pondering how the Common Core's curricular proposals rely on quantifiable measures of textual complexity, Guillory reminds us, for instance, that complexity is not simply an intrinsic quality of texts but is also an artifact of the reading process. Good reading involves, in addition to comprehension, another process that is "self-critical" and "self-revising." Aiming to expand the set of acts that count as an exercise of literacy beyond those measured by the tests that Guillory discusses, Kinohi Nishikawa honors the act of "merely reading," in an essay that recounts how troubling the popularity of hip-hop fiction is for commentators who prefer to imagine African American reading as part of a story of racial uplift. Proposing that Bruno Latour's actor-network theory might change the discipline's under-

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standing of criticism's procedures and goals, Rita Felski envisions a new ethos of "mid-level reading," a practice that would move laterally across several texts instead of going deep into a single one and that would at the same time eschew the distant, bird's-eye view of an entire literary system that has been the goal of much sociology of literature. Add to this "over-the-shoulder reading," a term whose conflicting meanings Patricia Crain explores and exploits, using it to evoke both the policing of children's reading and the nostalgic fantasies of intimacy we adults conjure up when we try to recover the absorptive, hypnagogic childish reading we might once have undertaken while sitting in a parent's lap. Add too the itinerant reading depicted by Leah Price in her essay on the long tradition of the mobile-library movement and on the longevity of the paperback. Citton offers yet another redescription of reading in his account of reading as hacking. He argues that today literary analysis should be cast not as a means by which a reader extracts meaning from a text but as a means by which a reader, undeterred by older notions of the finality of the text, updates the very code that produces the text's meanings. In terms that resonate with Felski's proposal that actor-network theory might help us suspend our usual subject-object binaries and make us think about how entangled readers are with their reading matter ("we make works of art even as they make us," says Felski), Citton presents reading as a process of cocreation.

And though instructors in college and university departments might be tempted to characterize themselves as their culture's master readers, one might conclude from some of these essays that reading knows neither perfect masters nor absolute mastery. In his essay, Christopher Cannon, working with medieval texts, uncovers a definition of reading that involves so thoroughgoing a knowledge of the text that the successful reader, having committed the text to heart, carries it through life and reads it "again and again—ever afterward." Cannon thus spotlights the difference between being someone who reads—more precisely, who happens to read—and being a reader, a distinction between an action and an identity whose ethical implications lie beyond the scope of the CCSSI's mostly instrumentalist account of literacy. Andrew Elfenbein, who proposes that we relinquish our usual adult-centered understanding of reading to recognize how children learn "from other children, the media, and other sources of language," reminds us that adult readers often "read without quite reading." Because they read fluently, adult readers are likely to be entrapped in automatic patterns that warp their comprehension of the text before their eyes. Learning to read is in this account a lifelong process, one that we academics, for instance, who have long since left our schooling behind us, must resume whenever we read outside our home disciplines.

As the last example suggests, while these essays help us look past the debates about the standards so as to better acknowledge the manifold ways of using and relating to texts that these debates have tended to sideline, they also have the cumulative effect of displacing the classroom space, which too often figures as the implied horizon of literacy education. These essays honor, instead, reading outside and after school; they also leave teachers mainly in the shadows, to make room for social, familial, and defiantly intimate reading environments. As Price puts it, after opening her essay with a vignette introducing homeless readers who have figured out how to remain lifelong readers even while sleeping rough, "[L]earning to read also means learning where to find the preconditions of literacy: a supply of printed or digital matter . . . ; a supply of human beings to curate, catalog, store, and retrieve it . . . ; a place in which to consume it . . . ; and other readers with whom to compare notes and exchange recommendations." As depicted here, learning to read involves much more than what can be taught in

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any classroom at any level. This holds true as well, for instance, in Lisa Zunshine's passionate account of what the experience of reading fiction can contribute to children's cognitive development (Zunshine, like Holquist and Arata, questions the privileging of so-called informational texts that she finds in the documentation surrounding the Common Core standards). The cognitive-cultural scaffolding that the young student builds up over time is the outcome not so much of classroom lessons that transmit information as of the imagining of mental states that he or she experiences while immersed in fictional worlds.

Discussions of the CCSSI have centered on a stripped-down account of reading as simply a set of skills. The Common Core's emphasis on the text in itself has the effect of downplaying the scaffolding that Zunshine and Elfenbein refer to, the background knowledge and experience that readers must mobilize to make inferences about what they read. In response, the essays in this cluster collectively situate our reading acts not in bilateral relations involving reader and text or reader and author but in an ecology that comprehends as well other figures, those whom Deborah Brandt calls "sponsors of literacy": "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy" (qtd. in Price's essay). In this ecology, moreover, reading instruction (as Elfenbein proposes) is not the sole source of literacy. Control over reading is not exclusively in adult hands. The paradox here is that our field in the humanities—a place of so-called higher learning that sustains itself by virtue of books and libraries, reading and interpretation—should be the origin of this reminder that literate behaviors are of various kinds, that there are many things to do with texts beyond interpreting them, and that the schoolroom is only one among many spaces where relations to books develop. Those spaces include the mind, and they have delicate ecologies. As Crain demonstrates exemplarily as she traces the influence of a "boy's book" (*Treasure Island*) in Henry James's mental universe, the stories we read give shape to a private, intimate space of affects, desires, and memories. If it is true that books are welded into our identities when we learn to read as children, then the collective responsibilities of educators in the ELA are probably far greater than can be outlined in standards or tested on paper or on computers.

Holquist speaks to such concerns when he begins his unsparing analysis with the reminder that "[l]earning to read is inseparable from teaching to read": his essay confirms that in this complex ecology we academics have a natural role as thinkers and researchers. In its content, as much as for its intellectual bravura, his piece offers a forceful reminder both of our commitment as a professional body to the advancement of learning and of the investigative streak that defines us. Sometimes only years of scholarship and reflection can yield the kind of science that seems needed to perfect what Steiner calls the "great promise" held out by the Common Core. Analyzing in the standards the uneasy and unresolved cohabitation of fiction and nonfiction, Holquist confirms what many of us have intuited. Not only do the standards marginalize imaginative writings in favor of informational texts, but, absent a richer understanding of what language can do, the standards risk shaping a generation of readers who learn to read books only as practical-minded realists, in the manner of a Sancho Panza. If, as seems to be the case, a schooling in forensics, in the older rhetorical sense of the term, represents the principal goal of the Common Core reforms, where will we go to find the creative dreamers,[4] the Don Quixotes who have entered the realm of fiction and learned to play with words and ideas in the way that literature fosters? Steiner, a former New York State commissioner of education, expresses a concern similar to Holquist's, in the vibrant language

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of someone who learned poets by heart. Citing Kant, Steiner speaks of the "feeling of life" that defines the aesthetic experience. The contributors to this section remind us of the multiple roles that we as MLA members can play in the ecology that sustains reading. While the architects of the Common Core standards pursue their remarkable effort to change the landscape of literacy in the United States, we can help create and preserve, among other spaces for literacy, those where a child, sometimes passionately, sometimes just idly, bends over a book or smartphone merely to read.

Notes

1. Citton uses David M. Berry's words to describe this subject as one who might "unify the information that society is now producing at increasing rates, and [who] understands new methods and practices of critical reading (code, data visualisation, patterns, narrative)."

2. This claim, we hasten to add, can be made only when speaking of the Common Core as a method designed to foster basic skills. Guillory, in his contribution to the collection, addresses matters of curriculum, which he describes as "unapologetically national," and also treats the possible limits of this method.

3. For more on close reading, see Culler; Guillory; Gang.

4. A renewed interest in understanding creativity has led to rich research on the modalities of creative "incubation" that lie outside the "cluster of basic cognitive processes" that preside over information gathering (Ward and Kolomyts 98, 94). Dreaming—the "simultaneous entertaining or integrating of opposing ideas" (101)—visualization, metaphoric thinking, and wordplay are conducive to originality. Scarry provides another point of entry into the way that immersive experiences of fiction enrich the reader's aesthetic and creative capacities.

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