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Review of *Uncommonly Good Ideas: Teaching Writing in the Common Core Era*, by Murphy, S., & Smith, M.A.

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Murphy, S., & Smith, M.A. (2015). *Uncommonly Good Ideas: Teaching Writing in the Common Core Era*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 155 pp.

A first glance at the slim volume ignites both curiosity and a sense of cautious, hopeful optimism. I wonder how Murphy and Smith's uncommonly good ideas compare to the best practices of a decade ago, during what these authors might call the "pre-Common Core Era." I have witnessed several reform initiatives, like many educators, including No Child Left Behind (NCLB), that according to the authors, squeezed writing out of the curriculum (p. 2). The good news, they declare, is that "writing is back in fashion, due in part to the [Common Core State Standards] CCSS" (p. 3).

In Chapter 1, Murphy and Smith argue that uncommonly good ideas in writing instruction are not new; they do, however, "carry a different weight" in the CCSS (p. 4). Thanks to "fewer, higher, deeper" anchor standards, these big ideas are actually "enduring practices" (p. 4). Because of this emphasis, the book attempts to especially appeal to experienced teachers who are too often objects rather than agents of reform (p. 7); however, in my opinion, any emphasis on externally-imposed standards will necessarily keep teachers in an object position. I wholeheartedly agree with the authors that teachers must engage in the debates of our profession.

The core of the book excavates four big ideas embedded in the CCSS. These include integrating the language arts, extending the range of writing, spiraling and scaffolding, and collaborating. After conceptualizing each, Murphy and Smith ask the reader to "take the plunge" and "dive deeper" through case studies across grade levels (middle school to 1st year college). Throughout the book, the authors weave craft workshop lessons into case

studies incorporating key elements of the CCSS, including try-it-on writing and mentor texts.

Of particular value to novice teachers, Chapter 2 explicitly outlines basic features of lesson design, offering “one model in a world of infinite models” that integrates reading, writing, listening and speaking (p. 14). I like that the authors provide this template, then focus on the big ideas of writing in subsequent chapters. I also appreciate the attention to modifications, including support for English language learner (ELLs).

The authors broaden notions of genre and range in Chapter 3. They extend the idea of range from audience, purpose, and task to considerations of writing conditions (time, collaboration, support, and technology). I find it helpful that the authors provide extensions for genre tasks (narrative, informational, and argument). Yet, I continue to wonder, where is poetry? As in the CCSS, discussion of teaching writing in this genre is absent.

A unique thread throughout the first several chapters is the use of food as a personal, approachable topic, especially for writers who are learning to trust each other within a writing community. One of my favorite food-based assignments is in Chapter 3 where students conduct investigations into modern food labels and explain them.

A highlight of Chapter 4 is the authors’ clarification that grade level standards represent goals students have broadly achieved by the end of each year. They provide helpful vignettes illustrative of spiraling, scrimmaging and scaffolding.

Murphy and Smith point out in Chapter 5 that collaboration remains central in the CCSS. They provide case studies across three layers of collaboration (student-student, teacher-student, and teacher-teacher) with interesting models of online (e.g. blogs) and

long-term projects including student writing samples as well as examples of teachers collaborating in lesson design and curriculum reform.

Chapter 6 echoes the call in Chapter 1 for teachers to enter into professional conversations by providing a vignette of a teacher-leader who demonstrates “positive deviance” (p. 135). Here the authors argue that change must come from teachers who are empowered and invested in their knowledge and abilities (p. 136). They write, “...we know what happens...when the vision [of reform] and reality collide” and teachers are served with lists of “do’s and don’ts and new caveats about what is acceptable and unacceptable” (p. 4).

I hope this book will help resurrect of the teaching of writing in secondary English classrooms while anchoring it in the realities of the Common Core Era. I admire the authors for engaging teachers in the conversation. However, I also urge readers to keep a critical eye focused on a CCSS reform movement that promises to level opportunities despite an increasingly inequitable landscape. Murphy and Smith are on target to fuel professional conversations about the importance of writing instruction and to foster both novice and seasoned English teachers’ professional development.