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## Book Review: Closer Readings of the Common Core: Asking Big Questions about the English/Language Arts Standards (2013)

Mary-Jo Morse

*State University of New York at Cortland*

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## BOOK REVIEW

# Closer Readings of the Common Core: Asking Big Questions about the English/Language Arts Standards (2013)

**Authors:** Albers, P., Bomer, R., Compton-Lilly, C., Dudley-Marling, C., Jaegar, E., Orellana, M.J., Roderiguez, G., Stewart, K., Wilde, S., & Wilson, M.

**Editor:** Patrick Shannon

**Publisher:** New York: Heinemann **ISBN:** 03255048765

**Reviewer:** Mary-Jo Morse

### About the Authors:

Patrick Shannon is a Professor of Education and coordinator of the Reading Specialist certification program at Penn State University. He is the author and editor of sixteen books connected with issues of literacy teaching and learning. Many of his books provide critical, counter viewpoints to the current educational thoughts and policies of the day.

The ten contributing authors, ( Peggy Albers, Randy Bomer, Catherine Compton-Lilly, Curt Dudley-Marling, Elizabeth Jaeger, Marjorie Orellana, Sandra Wilde, Maja Wilson, Gloria-Beatriz Rodriguez, and Kristopher Stewart), have written essays concerning the consequences of implementing the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. Brief biographies for each contributing author are provided in the text.

### The Common Core – A Closer, More Critical Look

Patrick Shannon's edited volume, *Closer Readings of the Common Core: Asking Big Questions about the English/Language Arts Standards*, comes at a critical time for K-12 educators, as well as teacher educators preparing teacher candidates to teach to and with the Common Core State Standards, as this 2013-2014 academic year issues in the full implementation of the CCSS nationwide. During the last eighteen months, a multitude of texts have been published to support in-service teachers as well as pre-service teacher candidates in understanding and implementing the CCSS. Most of these texts provide not only necessary background knowledge about the Common Core Standards but additionally present the reader with research-based strategies with which to engage learners while meeting the mandates of the standards. More importantly, however, these "other texts" have nary a word to say about the hazards to teachers, the curriculum, and most importantly, our learners, if the Common Core State Standards are implemented without forethought as to what is and who are privileged in the CCSS framework. Shannon's text differs in this regard; it is indeed a "horse of a different color."

From the beginning to end, Foreword and nine chapters, this relatively short text of 101 pages enlightens the reader, novice and expert teacher alike, about the Common Core State Standards from their "humble beginnings" through to their adoption by the states. Along the way, the authors of each chapter illuminate important points and raise critical questions concerning how the Common Core State

Standards privilege specific types of knowledge—particular ways of knowing and learning. Additionally, Shannon and his colleagues explain that the development of the CCSS and the Anchor Standards have delineated, defined and positioned students as the Common Core State Standards lay out what it means to be a "successful student" at each grade level along the path to high school graduation. The authors raise critical questions for the reader to consider, such as: Which members, or groups, in our society are positioned to benefit from the Common Core State Standards, and alternatively which members will be disadvantaged by their implementation? Whose ideologies are propagated, and whose are silenced? How does, or doesn't the CCSS accommodate for the vast differences in the funds of knowledge that students bring into the classroom? Do the CCSS Anchor Standards represent what is truly needed for young adults leaving high school and entering into a future where advances in technology are ever-changing the landscape of what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century?

Randy Bomer states, "To critique the CCSS is not to be unfriendly, complaining, or curmudgeonly. It is to be critical- to recognize that political artifacts, such as standards for public schools, always encode relations of power. Being critical means exposing who wins and loses in those relations, and insisting that there are alternatives. It is important to critique the standards because, by their nature, they standardize; they narrow the possible practices and identities available to students" (p. 26). Although, some of the criticisms and concerns have been expressed elsewhere, what makes "*Closer Readings...*" a "horse of a different color" is the research that each author supplies to support their concerns and positions, as well as the upfront acknowledgement that there is much that is good about the CCSS. Case in point: In Chapter 2, "Common Core Children," Bomer acknowledges that the CCSS establishes the "positive identities" of students as : capable, intellectually able and equal to peers, thoughtful, responsive readers capable of independent thinking, as well as writers and authors able to compose a complete text" (pp. 24-26). These are positions that have not been previously afforded to all students, and establish a very positive benefit to each and every child in the educational system.

Having read and utilized similar texts (Calkins et al., 2012 ; Morrow et al., 2012; Neuman & Gambrell, 2013) in my teaching of undergraduate literacy courses, I find Shannon's "*Closer Readings of the Common Core: Asking Big*

*Questions about the English/Language Arts Standards* to be an excellent counter-balance, indeed raising the big questions and illuminating significant concerns for those in-service and pre-service teachers charged with implementing the CCSS this year and into the future. I would highly recommend that veteran teachers, new teachers and pre-service teachers alike take the opportunity to read “*Closer Readings*” because once having read this text, it will be almost impossible for educators to thoughtlessly implement the CCSS without understanding the consequences of following the CCSS without forethought and planning. Shannon’s goal for this text is to make teachers, parents, and the community aware that they can be active agents of change in the ongoing development and implementation of educational reform, and specifically how the CCSS is implemented in schools and classrooms nationwide. However, to be effective as agents of change, one needs to understand both sides of the story. We have heard one-side loud and clear, now it is time to hear and understand the other.

### References

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- Morrow, L. M., Wixson, K., & Shanahan, T. (Eds.), (2013). *Teaching with the Common Core standards for English language arts, Grades 3-5*. New York: Guilford.

Mary-Jo Morse is a full-time Instructor at the State University of New York College at Cortland. She currently teaches undergraduate literacy courses for pre-service teacher candidates pursuing Childhood B-6 teaching certification in New York State. Mary-Jo is also a doctoral student in the Reading Department at the State University of New York at Albany. Her current focus is on effectively preparing pre-service teacher candidates for teaching to and with the CCSS in the intermediate grades with informational texts, as well as for preparing pre-service teacher candidates for successful completion of the edTPA certification exam.