

# ***Review of *Uncommon Core: Where the Authors of the Standards Go Wrong about Instruction****

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In *Uncommon Core*, Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm (2015) are not opposed to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) so much as they are critical of how the standards' authors, specifically David Coleman, have narrowed the focus and purpose of the standards through various auxiliary and supplementary texts. This book is not written to undermine or to reject the standards. Rather, the authors are interested in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the standards and helping teachers adjust their pedagogy to embrace the strengths (e. g., the focus on process and vertical alignment) while addressing the weaknesses (e. g., opposition to pre-reading and text selection protocols). They understand that 45 states and Washington D. C. have adopted the standards and seek to dialogue with the teachers who are now faced with teaching according to the CCSS. As such, this book is a solid resource for literacy teachers advocating for an inquiry approach—which they address through the language of “teaching for wisdom” (p. 16)—to teaching while complying with the CCSS. The authors explain that reading pedagogy should have two separate goals: to help students find personal reasons to read and to help students develop wisdom. *Uncommon Core* posits that both of these goals are best met through inquiry teaching, draws attention to a number of educational trends that resist inquiry practices (e.g., Appendix B's text selection protocols and Coleman's refusal to assign prereading activities), and provides a framework teachers can use to push back against these trends. Throughout the book, Smith, Appleman and Wilhelm provide an underlying theory as well as teaching strategies designed to help students read for personal reasons (pleasure) and use texts to

understand themselves as well as their culture and society (wisdom).

The book opens with a discussion of what the authors find promising in the standards, followed with a general critique. They agree with much of what the CCSS offers, specifically, the standards' conciseness, vertical alignment, emphasis on processes and strategies, and the ways that "the CCSS can promote professionalization of teaching/encouragement of creativity and knowledge making" (Smith, Appleman, & Wilhelm, 2015, p.6). The authors then introduce a number of concerns they have with the CCSS. While they briefly mention the concerns of assessment and teacher efficacy in the opening chapter, the book primarily focuses on the issues of how the CCSS "in their focus on skills, fail to take pleasure and wisdom into consideration, the very reasons reading skills are worth developing in the first place" (p. 16). Generally, *Uncommon Core* focuses its criticism on the supplementary and auxiliary documents provided by the CCSS, specifically David Coleman's model lesson for "A Letter From Birmingham Jail." As such, each chapter after the first teases out a particular issue the authors have with Coleman's lesson and the philosophy. They demonstrate where they believe Coleman goes wrong and provide theoretically-sound research-based strategies that answer Coleman's demands for rigor while establishing an inquiry stance for the standards. This structural trend for each chapter is broken in chapter six where the authors critique Appendix B on text selection instead of David Coleman's various demands and models.

Frankly, the authors are not nearly as concerned with the standards themselves as they are with David Coleman's various supplementary texts (Coleman, 2011; Coleman & Pimentel, 2012) instructing teachers on how best to approach the standards and the auxiliary text, Appendix B, concerning text selection (NGA Centers/CCSSO, 2010b). Each chapter opens with a brief

summary of a teaching model mandated by a supplementary or auxiliary text. Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm then thoroughly explore the theoretical underpinnings of such a mandate, explain how the theory is either poorly grounded or refuted in research, and provide a handful of strategies teachers can use to meet the needs of the CCSS and avoid the pitfalls of Coleman's response. In this vein, the second chapter explores the New Critical tradition that the CCSS appear to be grounded in and explains how the CCSS can flourish under constructivist models of thinking—specifically Rosenblatt's (1938) reader response theory. Chapter three is focused on the importance of pre-reading or “frontloading” strategies, which Coleman rejects as a sound practice. Chapter Four focuses on helping students learn to apply reading strategies to all texts. Chapter Five is about helping students make interpersonal and intertextual connections as they read. As noted earlier, the sixth chapter provides a critique of Appendix B and focuses on text selection, and Chapter Seven is a framework for teaching a unit on Dr. King's “A Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Each chapter is grounded in the idea that students need to read for pleasure and wisdom. Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm outline how Coleman's pedagogy resists pleasure and wisdom reading, and other than the opening chapter, each section of the book presents a number of strategies teachers can use to address the standards while teaching through an inquiry stance. The final chapter presents an inquiry unit.

The discussion of the standards' failure to promote pleasure reading is a well-developed critique of the standards within the book. Throughout the book the authors demonstrate that the standards are not concerned with how students apply their reading to their own lives and are more concerned with reading for social and informational purposes than for personal ones. The authors provide a strong argument for pleasure reading through a focused discussion of Rosenblatt's (1938) continuum of efferent and aesthetic reading and by addressing how students need a

wide range of reading experience across this continuum. The argument for pleasure reading is supported and developed throughout the book as the authors introduce a Vygotskian (1978) framework grounded in the need for students with aid from an experienced other to move through their zone of proximal development (ZPD) toward their zone of actual development (ZAD) while avoiding student shutdown as they reach, what Wilhelm defines as, a zone of frustrational development (ZFD). They briefly explain that Coleman expects all lessons to be within a student's ZAD—where they can complete the assignment unassisted by a teacher. However, “Vygotsky argued that learning occurs in the *zone of proximal* development, the zone where students can do something with help that they cannot yet do alone” (Smith, Appleman, & Wilhelm, 2015, p. 41). By assuming students can complete all the assignments on their own, Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm assert that Coleman's lessons are either all too simple and thus will not promote learning or they will lead students to their ZFD. Because student engagement and comfort with texts is ignored by the supplementary texts discussed in *Uncommon Core*, the authors demonstrate that Coleman's approach to teaching reading will serve to disengage readers. The authors argue that students must find personal reasons for reading if teachers are to expect students to become life-long readers and thinkers.

The ZFD is defined as that point where the student believes that they cannot complete the assigned reading or task and quits trying altogether. Smith, Appleman, & Wilhelm (2015) are concerned with the ZFD because “once students are in the ZFD, rescue and rehabilitation are no longer possible” (p. 60). The authors feel that Coleman's approach to the CCSS ignores the teacher's roll with helping student development, and that his pedagogical demands are likely to lead students toward the ZFD where they will abandon the activity and fail to learn. I found the discussion of the ZFD particularly important as it outlined the

authors' primary concern with the various supplementary documents suggesting how to best teach to the CCSS.

As strong as the critique of Coleman's understanding of learning theory is, the issue of reading for wisdom feels contrived, and too easily rebutted by much of the authors' critique of the CCSS's focus on informational and literary reading. Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm's premise that literacy pedagogy should be aimed at helping students develop wisdom and learn to think beyond the texts and school is incredibly important, and the strategies presented in *Uncommon Core* will certainly help educators prepare students to do so, but the critique of the CCSS as not focusing on wisdom is not entirely fair. I agree with Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm that the standards as presented by Coleman (2011) are not concerned with developing student wisdom, but this is a problem with the supplementary texts the authors critique, not with the standards themselves. Inherent in the standards is the idea that reading is reading—that skills learned by reading one text can be applied to reading another text—and it is important to draw connections across various texts. The authors focused on the reading standards in *Uncommon Core*, which are concerned almost exclusively on reading a single text. However, the reading standards were written to coincide with the writing standards, and inherent in the writing standards is the need to write about multiple texts and connect fiction and non-fiction texts within argumentative or expository writing. Inherent in the writing standards is the need to make the intertextual and intercultural connections the authors call for in their first chapter. While the reading standards encourage students to focus on a single text, the writing standards require one to apply the reading standards across multiple texts in order to connect themes, ideas, and arguments. The writing standards require students to apply their reading skills across texts, and it is in these writing standards that one finds the wisdom called for in *Uncommon Core*. The standards are not devoid of wisdom as presented in

*Uncommon Core.* That said, I completely agree with the author's critique of David Coleman. The supplementary texts that Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm discuss are not concerned with developing wisdom in any way, and the authors' calling attention to the ungrounded pedagogy found in these texts is needed and welcome.

There are moments throughout the text that it feels like the authors are making a straw man argument out of Coleman and attacking him. However each time I begin to question their argument, Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm answer these feelings by pointing out that they are not making any mandates, but suggestions. For example, in chapter two the authors open their discussion of Coleman's approach by explaining how his perspective is grounded in the New Critical tradition. They then explain how Coleman's approach fails to help students understand complex texts guiding them more toward their ZFD than their ZAD. The authors then provide a concise history of New Criticism and reader response (Rosenblatt, 1938). However, rather than completely reject New Criticism, Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm provide a number of question starters that help promote their goals of developing personal reasons for reading and promoting student wisdom. At the heart of their argument is not that there is a single appropriate method or theory of teaching reading. Instead, they want to open the CCSS up for interpretation and provide a space for dialogue. The authors consistently call for teacher professionalism and teacher judgment throughout *Uncommon Core*.

The authors reject Coleman's conception of a single set of "best practices." Coleman provides one frame from which all literacy education should derive. Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm refute this by providing multiple frames that can serve an important role in literacy education depending on curricular goals. I do wish that the authors had spent a little time explaining how Coleman's

approaches can be helpful in certain instances. For example, Chapter Three is about the general need to frontload complex texts for students in order to promote understanding. They rightly critique and refute Coleman’s argument to never conduct pre-reading activities, and provide five frameworks for frontloading that a teacher can use to develop strong CCSS-focused lessons. However, there are moments when a blind reading of a text can also meet a curricular goal. For example, I never frontload my teaching of Earnest Thayer’s (1888) “Casey at the Bat.” Part of my goal is to surprise my students. I want them to build that narrative from beginning to end grounded only in their current knowledge of baseball and the typical “sports narrative” where the hero saves the day. I love helping my students deal with the disappointment many of them feel at the end of the poem, and in many ways I use the poem to scaffold dealing with unsatisfactory endings. Now, I am able to do this because I know the community in which I teach—a community with a rich baseball tradition who has sent multiple teams and players to the Little League World Series. My decision to not frontload will not work with this poem universally. It is dependent on my students already being familiar with the game as well as familiar with the sports narrative. Because I know my students and their experience with both, I am able to present the poem without any frontloading. What Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm constantly address in this book is that teaching and learning are socially-situated events, and that a single string of methods will not promote learning in all settings. Instead, teachers should have a strong grasp of the underlying theories of learning and then choose from various strategies depending on each individual teaching situation.

The other idea that goes unstated but permeates the text is that while the CCSS and the authors of *Uncommon Core* are hoping to teach students *how* to think, Coleman’s approach tends to focus on teaching students *what* to think. This distinction is most obvious when they focus on Coleman’s student discussion

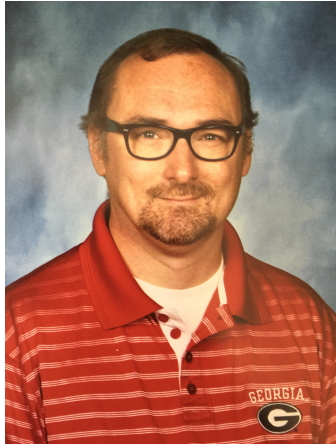
questions provided for teaching Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address.” Coleman’s first questions are concerned with comprehension of key vocabulary. Each question is designed to elicit a specific answer to promote Coleman’s interpretation. The authors ask how this lack of genuine inquiry fails to promote thinking and transfer of skills. Smith, Appleman, and Wilhelm are focused on developing independent thinkers who can apply reading skills across various texts, while Coleman seems more interested in introducing students to specific canonical texts and making sure they have an “appropriate” understanding of these texts.

Finally, if the authors were to remove all of their critiques of the CCSS and specifically Coleman’s curricular mandates, *Uncommon Core* is still a helpful resource for teachers. While I don’t agree with the authors’ argument that the CCSS ignores teaching for wisdom, I do find that the various activities found in this book promote wisdom. Teachers new to the standards can use this text to develop rich lessons that will help students connect to texts and then build connections between texts. What I appreciate about this book is that it does not tell anyone how he or she should teach a particular lesson on a particular text. Instead, it provides various frameworks for producing lessons regardless of the text.



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