

# Reading Curriculum in the Age of Spectacle: Reclaiming Experience and Dialogue in Reading

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TWO DAYS AFTER THE INAUGURATION of the 45th President of the United States, Americans were told on national television that the repeated lies forwarded by the administration about the size of the inauguration crowd were not “falsehoods” but rather “alternative facts;” soon after the president began enthusiastically labeling venerable journalism outlets “fake news” and issuing public statements and 40-character rants that seem aimed at gaslighting all of America. Nearly a year into this presidency, little has changed. Each day has brought a new barrage of unprecedented political actions met with an equally unprecedented public outcry. And over all of it runs a rhetorical battle for the “truth” that has left many of us feeling as though we have woken up to an Orwellian nightmare.

Despite the Big Brother-esque phrasing of certain executive branch communications and the frightening steps it has taken towards suppressing of some voices in government, I am inclined to agree with Neil Postman’s (2005) now decades-old argument that we are less like *1984* and more like *Brave New World*; we have allowed pleasure and spectacle to replace our interest in experiences and dialogue. Perhaps even closer to our current reality is the world of *Fahrenheit 451*. While it is often erroneously read as a critique of government censorship, Ray Bradbury’s (1951/2013) novel offers an illustration of a more insidious yet subtle threat against reading and thought than overt book banning – the voluntary submission of one’s intellectual life to the inane pleasures of the spectacle. Book burning firemen are a symptom of the problem and not its cause.

At the risk of sounding alarmist, I would argue that that we are up against the threat Bradbury describes; part of the answer to the inevitable “how did we get here?” has to do with our relationship with texts and in turn with the sort of relationship with texts that schools encourage for their students. As I am writing this, I have been discussing with my Introduction to Teaching Secondary English students the history of the “literacy crisis” in American education. Ironically, hysteria around past “crises” is in no small part responsible for our current dilemma; overemphasizing reading as a key skill for career readiness and our competitiveness in the global market creates a curriculum of reading that divorces reading from the world. Learning

to read in school is increasingly corporatized and mechanized, a trend accelerated by the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (CCSS-ELA). Reading has increasingly been rendered merely a passive tool one must acquire to get a job instead of being framed as a rich, dialogic activity of engagement in the world and ideas. Reading has become about isolated spectacle instead of dialogic lived experience.

Paulo Freire (1970/2006) argues, "If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings" (p. 88). Dialogue matters. Lived experience matters. We can only become ourselves by claiming the word for ourselves, a process facilitated and mediated by interaction with others through dialogue. Reading as spectacle is reading as word calling, reading for pre-determined meanings, reading that encourages passivity. It is a reading that produces test scores but little knowledge creation. In Freirean terms, reading as spectacle is a tool of the oppressor, a means of alienating the reader from self and the world to keep the reader from caring about the world. This is reading that results in comfortable answers and little risk, but it is also a reading that distracts us from uncomfortable truths and allows the rise of a demagogue.

Reading, as dialogic, lived experience, invites the reader's knowledge of and experience in the world into meaning making. It requires dialogue between text and reader and among readers. Dialogue means risk taking, willingness to be wrong and to explore unknown truths. It also means embracing new possibilities. Reading in this way is an act of praxis; it is Freire's "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). By naming and purging the spectacle from our reading curriculum, we can reclaim the possibility of becoming, of engaging in praxis, and of transforming the world.

### **Reading, Spectacle, and *Fahrenheit 451***

Before turning to reading curriculum specifically, I would like to explore for a moment what *Fahrenheit 451* says about reading, in order to illustrate what reading curriculum must overcome to move us away from the precipice of the spectacle. In Bradbury's imagined future, people are so distracted by the spectacle and information, so unwilling to do the hard work of meaning making, that few care about experience and dialogue. As would-be-mentor Faber tells protagonist Guy Montag, "Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord" (p. 83). Distracted by the spectacle and fed a steady stream of increasingly superficial images, people stopped caring about books and ideas. And as they stopped reading, they stopped paying attention to the world. Montag wonders how it is his society seems to ignore what appears to be a major world war carrying on in the background: "Is it because we're having so much fun at home we've forgotten the world?" (p. 69). Room-sized televisions broadcast inane programming, seashell earbuds constantly hum with mindless drivel and advertising, "happiness" is paramount – all at the expense of relationships and ideas; the world of *Fahrenheit* is driven by the spectacle.

The concern at the heart of Bradbury's novel – that we are increasingly distracted by vapid, flashy information at the expense of dialogic engagement with each other and ideas – is one expressed by theorists from various schools of thought over at least the last 100 years; science fiction writers are not our only prophets. Guy Debord (1967/1983) describes the spectacle as the ultimate outcome of a commodity-driven society in which people have become

alienated from their own production: “Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (p. 7). The spectacle is “whatever escapes people’s activity, whatever eludes their practical reconsideration and correction. It is the opposite of dialogue” (p. 11). The society of the spectacle is defined by isolation and alienation from lived experience. Postman’s (2005) argument is a similar one; we have shifted from a “word-centered culture” to an “image-centered culture” (p. 61). Such a shift changes the way we engage ideas and makes us less patient readers. Reading in such an environment can only be about extracting discrete, predefined information instead of a process of negotiated meaning making.

Walter Benjamin’s (1937/2007) description of the rise of information at the expense of story echoes these same concerns. Experience is the basis of all story, both as the source material and as the thing that makes it worth telling again and again. Story is not only a record of experience but also a way for others to become a part of that experience and for new experience to be created. It is a web that connects us through time and space; it is both record and reinvention each time it is encountered. The grounding of story in experience means that it must be both social and mutable; it evolves according to the tellers and receivers of the story and has no fixed meaning. The reader of story must do the heavy lifting of meaning making; as Benjamin remarks: “The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (p. 89).

Information lacks amplitude because it is merely “there” – nothing to interpret or question or wonder about.<sup>1</sup> Information eliminates the shared record of experience that story offers; its value does not extend beyond the moment in which it is encountered. While both story and information can convey “extraordinary things,” information does not require the engagement of the reader in making meaning: “the prime requirement is that it appear ‘understandable in itself’” (Benjamin, 1937/2007, p. 89). Story relies on experience, both of the teller and the listener/reader, to create meaning, and that meaning is never fixed. Information aims to relay a specific meaning in a rapid-fire fashion, a fast “truth” of the matter with no need for interpretation. Story requires active engagement; information, passive reception. Story allows for dialogue; information leads us to the spectacle.

In Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit*, Montag’s wife, Mildred, represents the outcome of submitting fully to the spectacle as an alienated consumer of information. We first meet Mildred in a drugged stupor, her omnipresent seashell earbuds humming in her ears. Her days are spent fixated on the goings-on of the “family,” a personalized reality television show projected on the three walls of her living room. In Debord’s (1967/1983) conception of the spectacle, “the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality” (p. 19). This accurately describes Mildred’s world, one in which her relationship with the images of the “family” is more real to her than her marriage to Montag. Montag’s inability to recall where he and Mildred first met 10 years prior is symbolic of this as well; all his attempts to engage Mildred in dialogue – whether around the unhappiness that led to her overdose, the potential power of books, or the mundane details of their lives – are met with hollow responses and a quick retreat back to the spectacle.

Clarisse McClellan provides a counter to Mildred as someone who rejects the spectacle in favor of experience. Clarisse notices things – the morning dew, the man in the moon – and encourages Montag to do the same. Clarisse speaks not only of experience but also of dialogue:

“... they didn’t want people sitting like that, doing nothing, rocking, talking; that was the wrong *kind* of social life. People talked too much. And they had time to think” (Bradbury, 1951/2013, p. 60). Of course, such behavior is viewed as deviant in the age of spectacle; Clarisse and her atypical family are under surveillance and she meets a mysterious, untimely end. Faber represents another attempt to resist the spectacle: “I don’t talk *things*, sir.... I talk the *meaning* of things. I sit here and *know* that I’m alive” (p. 71). But, fearing the consequences, Faber hid his unorthodox thinking.

Information overload primes us to accept the spectacle. As Beatty instructs Montag:

‘Cram them full of non-combustible data, chock them so damn full of ‘facts’ they feel stuffed, but absolutely ‘brilliant’ with information. Then they’ll feel they’re thinking, they’ll get a *sense* of motion without moving. And they’ll be happy, because facts of that sort don’t change. Don’t give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy’” (p. 58).

Information is an easy diet that lulls us away from the more challenging and potentially troubling work of making sense out of experience. It is the quick sound bite that presents itself as “truth” and discourages questioning. Information is intellectual junk food – tasty, but consuming too much ultimately causes of intellectual atrophy.

Rejecting the spectacle means engaging in the real world instead of the contrived world. It means embracing dialogue and story over superficial speech and information. But it also means wrestling with troubling ideas instead of indulging in superficial happiness, an activity not without risk. Montag begins to recognize this as he wrestles with his growing disgust with his world: “We need not to be let alone. We need to be really bothered once in a while. How long is it since you were *really* bothered? About something important, about something real?” (p. 49). Books – as a physical representation of dialogue, experience, and story – strike Montag as the thing that might bring this disruption and redeem the world from the spectacle.

In a scene that feels frighteningly current when read against recent events, Fire Chief Beatty describes to Montag the effect that a modernizing world with rapidly changing media technology had on the relationship between people and ideas:

“It didn’t come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today, thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time . . .” (p. 55). Beatty continues: “I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren’t they? Don’t we keep them moving, don’t we give them fun? That’s all we live for, isn’t it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these” (Bradbury, 1951/2013, p. 56).

Enticed by the promise of pleasure in the spectacle, people gave up the complexities of dialogue, experience, and story. Such simplistic, monologic thinking creates a world few of us would want to live in. And yet ...

It is hard to not hear echoes in Beatty’s words – “the word ‘intellectual,’ of course, became the swear word it deserved to be” (Bradbury, 1951/2013, p. 55) – the sort of anti-intellectual sentiment increasingly pervasive in our own public discourse, a sentiment dismissive of texts and critical thought. It is hard not to see our contemporary moment reflected in the

world of *Fahrenheit 451* given the recent election of a reality television star, who boasts that he does not read books, to our nation's highest public office; a man who, in response to questions about the factual basis of his claims in a press conference shortly after his inauguration, ultimately responded, "I do get good ratings, you have to admit that" ("Full Transcript and Video: Trump," 2017). It is hard to not feel slippage towards a world where books are burned when closely examining the impact of neoliberal education policies, an impact amplified by the confirmation of a Secretary of Education who is openly dismissive of the very idea of public education and promotes policies that would harm our most vulnerable students (Mead, 2016; Strauss, 2017). It is hard to not feel the same despair as Montag at the superficiality of public thought when increasingly we get our news in flashy sound bites from television and online sources instead of via thoughtful engagement with in-depth reporting: "'Politics? One column, two sentences, a headline! Then, in mid-air, all vanishes! Whirl man's mind around about so fast under the pumping hands of publishers, exploiters, broadcasters that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought!'" (Bradbury, 1951/2013, p. 52). It is as though Bradbury anticipated public discourse in the age of Twitter.

### Curriculum and the World

Some years ago in my first semester of graduate studies, my mentor, Madeleine Grumet, introduced to me the idea that curriculum is "the world in drag," the way we dice up the experience of the world into tidy but arbitrary packages until it is "again recoded as it enters the ceremonies, structures, and rituals of schooling" (1999, p. 137). I puzzled over this idea for some time, working to reconcile my initial understanding of curriculum drawn from my years of classroom practice (the binder of stuff I was tasked with teaching) with my newly acquired language that described the socializing practices of schooling (the hidden curriculum) that I had both observed and participated in.

Even in defining curriculum at its most basic, it is difficult to parse out the *what* from the *how*. Standards – what students should know and be able to do – create a pretty firm *what*. Increasingly standards drive curriculum; a firm *what* delimits the *how*. The content and skills we think students should experience in schools often privileges one means of inquiry over another. A curriculum with general aims allows a wide range of possibilities with a wide range of effects. A curriculum with well-defined content and outcomes narrows the possible pedagogical approaches. A curriculum that ends in a standardized test leads to narrow possibility indeed.

Curriculum is inherently political. In deciding what children should learn, we inevitably are shaping their understanding of the world, their interactions in the world, and their sense of what is possible in the world. What we think students should do and be able to do comes laden with ideology; it either reflects what we think the world is at present (and therefore what students need to flourish in that world) or it suggests what we feel the world should be (and therefore what students must gain to accomplish that world). Curriculum reflects our world but through a distorted lens. It (re)creates our world but in potentially unintended ways. If we are in a world slipping towards spectacle, curriculum may itself become spectacle – or it may be reshaped as a force of resistance.

Reading curriculum, too, both reflects and (re)creates the world. If reading curriculum fails to acknowledge the reader's experience in the world or fetishizes the object of the text as information, it privileges a mechanized sort of reading born of spectacle; reading becoming

increasingly an alienated and alienating activity. Mildred and her friends react with fear and anger to Montag reading Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach": "'I've always said, poetry and tears, poetry and suicide and crying and awful feelings, poetry and sickness; all that mush! Now I've had it proved to me. You're nasty, Mr. Montag, you're nasty!'" (Bradbury, 1951/2013, p. 97). Their literal flight from the scene of the reading parallels their fear of discomfort and their willingness to ignore their emotional lives in the world – failed marriages, troubled children, and war. A reading curriculum that removes the reader and the world from the equation, that values information over experience, risks producing readers who lack agency and who are willing to retreat to the spectacle.

My concern about reading curriculum as potentially alienating and alienated from lived experience echoes one with which curriculum theorists have long wrestled. Maxine Greene writes:

Curriculum, from the learner's standpoint, ordinarily represents little more than an arrangement of subjects, a structure of socially prescribed knowledge, or a complex system of meanings which may or may not fall within his grasp. Rarely does it signify possibility for him as an existing person, mainly concerned with making sense of his own life world." (1975, p. 299)

If curriculum presents itself as the world without actually engaging action in the world, it alienates us from our learning; it becomes spectacle.

Curriculum alienated from the world results in the sort of schooling Clarisse describes:

' . . . we never ask questions, or at least most don't; they just run the answer at you, bing, bing, bing, and us sitting there for four more hours of film-teacher. That's not social to me at all. It's a lot of funnels and a lot of water poured down the spout and out the bottom . . . ' (Bradbury, 1951/2013, p. 27).

There is a lack of dialogue in such a classroom, both between members of the classroom community and between students and their curriculum content. No dialogue means passive learning, not unlike the banking model of education described by Freire that prohibits students from defining their world and themselves. Debord (1967/1983) argues that such alienation results in "the empire of modern passivity" (p. 10) over which reigns the spectacle.

Of course, we can reclaim curriculum from the spectacle and return to experience and the world. Reading curriculum that foregrounds dialogue and experience cultivates readers who participate in a living, dialogic world. In this way it might (re)create a world of possibility. Like Montag, in order to do this we must first wrestle with the complexities of our current reality; we must understand the forces that create and perpetuate the spectacle in order to defeat it.

### **Reading in the Common Core**

Since their release in 2010, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (CCSS-ELA) have driven the discussion around the teaching of reading and texts at the K–12 level; even for states that have declined to adopt or have since withdrawn support for the standards, the language and

spirit of the CCSS echoes in the standards drafted to replace them. It is also worth noting that the full title of the standards does, in fact, include disciplines beyond English despite the attention and responsibility for implementation falling largely to ELA teachers and classes.

To reiterate, CCSS-ELA are standards and not a curriculum. However, standards, particularly those tied to high-stakes accountability measures (as is generally the case with CCSS-ELA) drive curriculum decisions. The proliferation of curriculum aligned with the standards in the last few years, curriculum that often reads the CCSS-ELA without critique and at the expense of what seasoned educators know, is evidence of this. Classroom practices not specifically denoted in the standards do not make the curriculum cut. The skills that CCSS-ELA outline become what we teach students to do. And as Alan Block (1995) argues, the way we teach students to read is of critical importance: “reading instruction becomes curriculum. The way one is taught to read becomes the purpose and manner of reading: the technique becomes the thing. And the pedagogy makes possible what is readable, and what may happen when reading is practiced” (p. 5). The way we define literacy through standards and curriculum and the way we teach it largely determines what the next generation understands reading to be.

In a video for teachers created for Engage<sup>NY</sup>, New York state’s website aimed at assisting teachers in implementing the CCSS, David Coleman, the standard’s chief architect, explains how one might teach a close reading of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in alignment with the standards (New York State Education Department, 2012). It is chilling stuff. Aside from the general disdain Coleman seems to have for teachers and the work they do, it is clear that Coleman’s interpretation of curriculum and pedagogy aligned with the standards is one that removes the student and decontextualizes the text. Any discussion that attempts to connect the text to students’ lives or the world is forbidden or dismissed.

In his critique of Coleman’s reading, Daniel Ferguson (2014) details how this removal of the text from the world and the lives of students results in alienation and oppression. As he reminds us, “Critical literacy argues that students’ sense of their own realities should never be treated as outside the meaning of the text. To do so is to infringe on their rights to literacy.” Coleman’s vision of reading is a narrow one of “correct” interpretations and one which dismisses students’ lived experiences as inconsequential.

Since the CCSS-ELA are the loudest voice in the debate over what counts as reading at the K–12 level, it is problematic that they contain no mention of reading as an activity that involves dialogue, experience, or engagement in the world. Whether the omission is intended or not, the effect is that texts are studied as static objects to be mined for information and little or no value is placed on the *experience* of reading and *creating* meaning. The language of the standards positions the text as the central player in reading; readers are expected to do things to texts. The emphasis on “textual evidence,” while not bad in and of itself, becomes problematic absent the balancing presence of the reader as a meaning making agent.

Consider the anchor standards for 6th–12th grade reading (please see the appendix). Without exception they frame the text as the source of meaning; or more accurately as the source of information. Each standard is something students *do* to a text, not something they *do with* a text as part of a dialogic process. There is no mention of context, no mention of student response, no mention of connections to the social world. Texts are framed only as objects of mechanical study. For example, a sidebar on the “range and content of student reading” that accompanies the anchor standards reads:

To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students' own thinking and writing. Along with high-quality contemporary works, these texts should be chosen from among seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare. Through wide and deep reading of literature and literary nonfiction of steadily increasing sophistication, students gain a reservoir of literary and cultural knowledge, references, and images; the ability to evaluate intricate arguments; and the capacity to surmount the challenges posed by complex texts. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 35)

This statement and language elsewhere in the CCSS-ELA – about the nature of what literacy means and the value we place on the study of certain texts throughout the secondary school years – lead to troubling implications. For example, even the language “college and career ready” suggests that reading is about acquisition of information for a specific purpose. Nothing is said of the simple joy of reading or of the fact that reading texts is an extension of our innate drive to read the world. Instead of a source for inspiration and a site of dialogue, texts that matter are from a certain “high-quality” canon, sources of information that somehow equip students to meet the world without any consideration of the fact that students already live in the world and that life brings to the text meaning just as the text brings meaning to that life.

As Block notes, this view of reading becomes how we teach students to read and how they come to view reading – in our classrooms and beyond the school walls. The introduction to the CCSS-ELA bluntly states: “the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century” (1995, p. 3). James Gee (2008) describes such a definition as one that “rips literacy out of its sociocultural contexts and treats it as an asocial cognitive skill with little or nothing to do with human relationships. It cloaks literacy's connections to power, to social identity, and to ideologies, often in the service of privileging certain types of literacy and certain types of people” (p. 67). It is this view of literacy that builds the artificial divide between our classroom activity and students' experiences in the world and disempowers our students as readers and agents in the world. It is a view of literacy that leads us to Montag's world and to reading as spectacle.

Reading is further divorced from the world by the emphasis CCSS-ELA places on “textual evidence.” Of course, readings must be supported by evidence from the text; students must be in the habit of returning to the text to support claims and to explore ideas further. However, textual evidence is only one half of the meaning making puzzle. As an example of how CCSS-ELA and the focus on textual evidence is commonly translated into reading curriculum, consider materials from *Achieve the Core*, a curriculum site run by Student Achievement Partners (n.d.), a group founded by several of the framers of CCSS including Coleman.

In Student Achievement Partners' (2016) curriculum materials for teaching Kurt Vonnegut's short story, “Harrison Bergeron,” teachers are instructed:

Read the Big Ideas and Key Understandings and the Synopsis. Please do **not** read this to the students. This is a description for teachers about the big ideas and key understanding that students should take away **after** completing this task.



### Big Ideas and Key Understandings

- Through excessive regulation and oppression, society—not just the individual—sacrifices religion, culture, artistry, beauty, and greatness.
- Television, as a main-stream media source, has the power to enforce a particular propaganda.

(p. 1, original emphasis)

These directions are curious in that they delineate a finite goal for the reading (meaning is predetermined) and suggest that students should have no role in the meaning making (given that they should be kept in the dark about the purposes of the “discussion”).

The rest of the lesson sequence is a series of “text dependent questions” that require students to support their answers using evidence from the text. Certainly, the ability to derive meaning from a text using evidence is a crucial one, but nowhere does this lesson allow for debate, discussion, or dialogue about what that textual evidence might suggest. The presence of clearly “correct” answers in the teacher’s guide eliminates alternative meaning making. Nor is there any context for the reading provided; it is as though Vonnegut wrote the story in a cultural vacuum, and students are reading it in the same.

After reading and completing these text-dependent questions, students are asked to write an essay in response to this prompt:

The United States has often been called the land of opportunity. This suggests that individuals are free to pursue their dreams to the best of their abilities, which may differ greatly. At the same time, our Declaration of Independence states that all people are created equal. How does Vonnegut use characterization and word choice to warn his readers of the potential drawbacks of a truly “equal” society? Support your claims with valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence from the text, including direct quotes and page numbers.

There is an illusion that the prompt speaks to the world; after all, it does ask students to consider the Declaration of Independence. Or does it? There is no space provided for students to consider any evidence aside from the words of the story in their response. No space to engage in dialogue with the words of the Declaration, the context in which it was written, the context of Vonnegut’s writing, or their own lived experiences. The exemplar provided to illustrate expectations for student response to this prompt delivers a fine reading of Vonnegut’s story. But aside from bookending the writing with two decontextualized quotations from the world, the imagined student writer has done nothing to imagine how this story speaks to the world. Imagine the power of working to understand and problematize the idea of “equality” in dialogue with such a fine reading of the text and with the lived experience of our current cultural-political moment. That is the possibility of praxis. But, of course, it is also messy, disrupts the status-quo, and cannot be tested on a standardized test.

The fetishization of the text at the expense of the world causes what Robert Scholes (1985) describes as the problem of “teaching literature”:

When we say we ‘teach literature,’ instead of saying we teach reading, or interpretation, or criticism, we are saying that we expound the wisdom and truth of our texts, that we

are in fact priests and priestesses in the service of a secular scripture: ‘the best that has been thought and said’ – provided it has been said indirectly, through an aesthetic medium. (p. 12)

When we design curriculum with only one correct answer to a text-dependent question, we lead students to believe that the “right” answer is somewhere there on the page of the “sacred” text; texts – and possibilities – become closed. There is no dialogue.

Compounding our problem is the way we approach the classification of literature. Scholes notes that we are guilty of talking about literature in dichotomous ways that make it difficult for students to see themselves as producers of meaning. First, there is the division between “literature” and “non-literature” (1985, p. 8); such classifications give almost mythic qualities to “literature” that create a barrier between student and text. Consider again the CCSS-ELA’s call for students to read “works of exceptional craft.” We also divide texts between producers – those who write – and consumers – those who read - instead of embracing the interrelationship between reading and writing and the dialogic process of meaning making (see Scholes, 1989, p. 90). Finally, we create unnecessary demarcations between the “real” world and the “academic” (see Scholes, 1985, pp. 5–10), making it difficult for students to transfer important skills from one realm to the other.

Benjamin (1937/2007) laments the death of our storytelling ability and notes that we are becoming increasingly ill-at-ease with hearing stories and less adept at creating them: “It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences” (p. 83). A curriculum that does not encourage the reader’s active participation in meaning making but instead encourages reading as information gathering, amplifies this problem.

As a sidebar it is worth addressing whether or not “information” is the same as the “informational texts” of the CCSS-ELA. I certainly do not mean to demonize the call for the use of “informational texts” in the classroom; one can read informational texts in an active “experiential” way and can in turn read a story in a passive “informational” way. Benjamin’s argument is that certain texts lend themselves to certain modes of reading. I do not disagree. But I would also argue (perhaps against Benjamin) that any sort of text can be read in either mode. Louise Rosenblatt (1986) makes such an argument with her description of readings falling along a continuum between efferent (reading for what can be taken away) and aesthetic (reading for response in the moment) with most reading happening somewhere in between the extremes. My concern is less with the type of text – we should be encouraging students to read broadly – and more with what we do with a text. Or rather, what we encourage students to do.

To play a bit with the idea of “story” as “text” or to illustrate how an “informational text” can be read through experience, take my own reading of Benjamin’s essay. I could read simply for information, to extract Benjamin’s words without considering context or my own experience – reading ignoring the world. Or, as I have done to write this paper, I can read Benjamin’s essay through experience: I hear his words, considering the context in which they were written. I read for my own purposes, knowing that I am considering what the text tells me about story or how it may inform my understanding of reading curriculum, which causes me to attend more closely to certain parts of the text than others. I weigh what I read against my other experiences with this sort of material in order to decide what it means. When I read this text with others, I hear their renderings, which mingle and emerge as yet something new as we discuss the text. Perhaps you have read the essay yourself and recall elements differently. It is this ability to play with text –

to see how it fits the world and our experience, and to explore how it challenges our perspectives – that gives reading depth and joy and life. This space of play allows texts to both frustrate and invigorate us. This is dialogic reading. This is engaging in praxis.

### Models for Reading to Counterbalance the Standards

In Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag comes to believe that books can somehow bring depth and complexity to his life and struggles to find meaning in the few illegal texts he has squirreled away. In a sense, his initial impulse is to read as CCSS-ELA suggests – a mechanical activity of information extraction; a search for the right answers in the sacred space of the text. Like our students who fumble at the margins of text when we erect barriers between text and experience, Montag is unable to make sense of what he reads.

Faber functions to bridge Montag's readings to the world and his experience. Echoing Benjamin's description of the origin and function of story, he tells Montag: "Books were only one type of receptacle where we stored a lot of things we were afraid we might forget. There is nothing magical in them, at all. The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us" (Bradbury, p. 111). Montag's mistake was to believe that meaning existed as something finite in the text when in fact, as Faber tells him, meaning making is a far more complex process than simply decoding the words on a page and finding knowledge contained within. The object of the text is only one part of the larger equation of meaning making.

Faber explains that three things are needed for the type of meaning Montag so desperately seeks: quality of detail, the leisure to digest it, and "the right to carry out actions based on the interaction of the first two" (p. 113). Like Montag, we live in a world increasingly full of information; we are bombarded by texts. Despite this abundance, it is less common that we encounter texts with a richness of detail, or that we read with a critical eye the detail that is there to be had. We become impatient for the "truth" a text has to offer, instead of wrestling with it as Faber suggests we must; this is the dilemma facing students who want to read a text and "get it," students who have been led to believe that reading is a process of knowledge extraction.

Faber's third point suggests two things: reading is a process, not an instantaneous revelation, and as a process, its effects extend far beyond the moment in which we encounter words on the page. Reading is both shaped by and shapes our experience in the world. It is also a process that flourishes in an environment that encourages risk taking and allows for missteps.

The idea that reading curriculum should be based on the reader's experience in the world is certainly not a novel one. In some ways, CCSS-ELA can be read as a backlash against a misinterpretation of Reader Response theory as a method of reading that relies *only* on the emotional response of the reader, an over-correction that removed the reader from the picture completely. But a careful reading of Rosenblatt's (1986) work makes clear that emotional response is only step one of a larger meaning making process – the transaction between text and reader:

The physical text is simply marks on paper until a reader transacts with them. Each reader brings a unique reservoir of public and private significances, the residue of past experiences with language and texts in life situations. The transaction with the signs of

the text activates a two-way, or better, circular, stream of dynamically intermingled symbolizations which mutually reverberate and merge. (p. 123)

Reading is an interplay between text and reader, an interplay that occurs in a web of experiences and other texts. The experience of reading begins with a response. For many readers, and adolescents are no exception, that response is typically an emotional one. A sophisticated reader is able to take that emotional response and build on it, to question its relevance, and to return the response back to the text continuing the back and forth of meaning making. Like Clarisse, a good reader is full of questions and open enough to possibility to embrace improbable connections. Part of reading instruction then should focus on helping students see the need for rereading texts and re-visiting responses – and taking risks with their meaning making.

Scholes (1989) describes reading as dialectical; it is a creative process that takes place in time and involves “always, at once, the effort to comprehend and the effort to incorporate” (p. 9). Scholes uses the physics of centripetal and centrifugal forces as a metaphor for the way we engage with text. Centripetal forces draw us into the text and ask us to use critical skills to root around for the intention or meaning of the text. Centrifugal forces push us outward from the text, asking us to use creative skills to generate new meaning and new possibilities that engage our experience and the world. Even the centrifugal/centripetal metaphor, says Scholes, does not adequately capture the complexity of reading. But, it is a useful way to represent the fact that reading requires us to both look inward to the text and outward to the world. Somewhere, in the to-and-fro spiral, the back and forth between the two (and it is always a back and forth as reading necessarily takes place in the dimension of time), meaning making occurs. Possibilities are generated, tried on, and discarded as new possibilities emerge. Because reading is a temporal process, there is never a “finished” reading, only the movement towards a more complete one given the circumstances and experiences of the reader. Readings are always contextual in time and space.

How do we move beyond superficial emotional response to a text? For Scholes, the solution is to “stop ‘teaching literature’ and start ‘studying texts’” (1985, p. 16). Scholes describes three textual competencies: reading, interpretation, and criticism. These are not competencies in the sense of “mastery” or testable endpoint, nor a checklist of sub-skills to be acquired. Rather, they are interrelated ways of approaching and considering texts that all readers engage in, skills that we never stop developing. Scholes notes our task as teachers is not to reveal meanings of texts to students, but rather to “show them the codes upon which all textual production depends, and to encourage their own textual production” (p. 25). To do this, students must produce texts – either written or oral – within the text (reading), upon the text (interpretation), and against the text (criticism). Next, I separately address each competency Scholes describes, but it is important to note that they occur concurrently and interdependently in practice.

Scholes describes the first competency, reading, as the primarily unconscious way we process text, the way we use cultural and textual codes to make sense of the story. This is typically the sort of “reading” that happens most easily in high school classrooms and is tested on standardized tests; it is the quality of detail that Faber tells Montag is the first step in meaning making.

The second competency, interpretation asks us to move beyond the events of the narrative to thematize the text, to draw connections to and read through larger cultural texts; Faber’s leisure to digest quality detail. In practice, this activity is difficult to separate from that of

reading; if reading is the centripetal activity, interpretation is the centrifugal one. In exploring these issues, readers write upon the text, making meaning by looking out to the world and reading through their experience.

Critique, the third competency, is the one most often neglected in classroom readings. It moves us to producing meaning against the text, arguing with the themes or even the codes from which a text is constructed. This is Faber's "right to carry out actions based on the interaction of the first two" (Bradbury, p. 113). Scholes argues this critique should occur "from some viewpoint beyond the merely personal – and the merely literary" (1985, p. 23); again, neither the reader nor the text has the answer alone. This conception of critique asks readers to be thoughtful about their responses, asks why they feel about the text the way they feel. To write against does not have to mean in opposition to, but rather is an acknowledgement of the reader's values; readers must be able to claim meaning generated in interaction with text and the world instead of simply looking to the text for the "right" answer. Critique requires student agency as it requires the reader to take responsibility for his reading.

Scholes sees criticism as "a way of discovering how to choose, how to take some measure of responsibility for ourselves and for our world. Criticism is our last best chance to loosen the bonds of the textual powers in which we find ourselves enmeshed" (p. 73). This is a step that readers in school settings are often reluctant to take, particularly those who have met with failure: Why risk being wrong once again? And it is one that teachers, myself included, often fear to encourage. What if someone has completely off-the-wall ideas? What if my own reading of a text is challenged? But in the act of reading against, in staking and defending a claim to meaning, readers become empowered to act and obligated to act. Reading becomes an active process of experience in the world.

### **The Word in the World**

I have never been able to quite decide whether or not to read the ending of *Fahrenheit* as hopeful; after all, Montag does witness the complete destruction of much of civilization in the novel's closing pages. But the novel also ends with Montag's recollection of a passage from the Book of Revelation, a passage that suggests the possibility of hope and rebuilding after devastation and destruction.

Perhaps our own situation need not be quite so dire. Perhaps we need only to explode restrictive notions of curriculum and not our society as a whole. In any case, the remedy to slippage towards spectacle is active resistance and intentional engagement in the world. As Greene argues, this is also what makes the difference between conditioning or rote learning and true learning; a student "will only be in a position to learn when he is committed to act upon his world. If he is content to admire it or simply accept it as given, if he is incapable of breaking with egocentrism, he will remain alienated from himself and his own possibilities; he will wander lost and victimized upon the road; he will be unable to learn" (1975, p. 313). Curriculum then must be explicit and deliberate about engaging students in the world.

Because reading is so enmeshed in the social, in lived experience, in the fabric of the world, the way we understand reading and the reading curriculum we develop have profound implications for our ability to act within the world; as Grumet (1999) describes it,

Rituals of reading are analogs for the social structure within which we develop selves and society. Through the interpretation of text, reading permits communications that may also significantly change social structure . . . It's not just people who change, knowledge does also. (p. 151)

If reading curriculum is dialogic and grounded in lived experience, we open possibility for dialogue in the world. As Freire argues, it is this dialogue in the world that allows us to become and that in turn, allows us to engage in praxis. Reading is an activity that mirrors lived experience and provides space for praxis.

We cannot be shy about our claim that dialogic reading practice allows for dialogic engagement in lived experience – and that our choice of how we read and teach reading is political. In his discussion of the “myth of literacy” (the idea that literacy is what civilizes us), Gee (2008) writes of Plato’s insistence that text always be dialogic but at the same time that the voice behind the text be privileged (lest some ignoble individual get the wrong idea about the text’s meaning). “Plato's dilemma,” as Gee names this quandary, is the fact that literacy can function both as a means of personal liberation and as a means of social control. And there really is no easy way out: “Literacy always comes with a perspective on interpretation that is ultimately political” (p. 64). Plato’s solution was to give the meaning making power to the state, an authoritarian move. Like Plato, Freire acknowledged that literacy is inherently political, but sought a pedagogy that would focus on the liberatory potential of literacy. The same tension drives the debate over what reading should look like. There is always the question of whether the reader's meaning making is “right,” whether by the standards of the institution (like the school) or a well-intentioned teacher.

Although Gee suggests there is no solution to Plato's dilemma, he does offer that being explicit about the political implications of literacy instruction moves in the right direction:

In the end, we might say that, contrary to the literacy myth, nothing follows from literacy or schooling. Much follows, however, from what comes with literacy and schooling, what literacy and schooling come wrapped up in, namely the attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs (at once social, cultural, and political) that always accompany literacy and schooling . . . A text, whether written on paper, or on the soul (Plato), or on the world (Freire), is a loaded weapon. The person, the educator, who hands over the gun hands over the bullets (the perspective) and must own up to the consequences. There is no way out of having an opinion, an ideology, and a strong one, as did Plato, as does Freire. Literacy education is not for the timid. (2008, p. 64–65)

The CCSS-ELA fail in part because they masquerade as apolitical. But the choice to decontextualize reading and remove the reader is entirely political. It is a choice that has authoritarian sorts of consequences, one that makes reading about passive information extraction, and one that denies the being and becoming of students. It is a choice that narrowly defines what experiences “count” and what ways of being matter.

Coleman has cited his experience starting a tutoring program for students at James Hillhouse High School as one that indicated to him the need for education reform: he was frustrated that “30 years after the civil-rights movement, none of these students were closer – not even close – to being ready for Yale. They’d had so little practice with commanding difficult text” (Goldstein, 2012). Coleman’s solution was to engineer a system of reading that removed

the student completely, one that fails to acknowledge the context of reader or text, one that allows for one, pre-determined meaning and one, pre-determined purpose. Whether this was a result of naivete or deliberate intent, the effect has been a further disenfranchisement of students, a political choice. This is a reality that CCSS and its supporters have yet to own up to.

I happen to know Hillhouse, as it is less than a mile from my campus (and only a few miles more from Yale). And while I would absolutely agree that the students at Hillhouse, like all students, should be challenged to read complex texts and should be taught the skills and given the support to do so, that is not enough. They also deserve space for praxis. They deserve to have their lived experiences brought into the classroom to be critiqued and celebrated. And not because they need to “be ready for Yale” or any other college or career. But because they deserve to have their humanity affirmed.

Consider these words from Coral Ortiz, the 2017 Hillhouse High valedictorian:

When we were young, we were taught that we were ‘one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.’ Our country taught us that no matter our income or race, we would all have the same chance to achieve our dreams. We were taught that there would never be a bias against a certain group of people, and that society believes in each and every one of us. These lessons of equality were taught as self-evident. These lessons of equality have and continue to be a lie.

The reality is that despite the fact that we recite the words ‘one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,’ it has been 50 years since the civil rights movement that our country has never been equal. (¶4–5)

I encourage you to read Ortiz’s speech in full (Ortiz, 2017) and to read about her contributions as a student representative to the school board, where she engaged in praxis by repeatedly speaking up and speaking out for the rights of students (Bass & Breen, 2017). Ortiz speaks a truth that the CCSS-ELA and Coleman and others refuse to name or refuse to see – the education we give our students, including the curriculum we use, is political, and too often that politics means the denial of students’ rights and humanity.

Like curriculum at large, reading curriculum is profoundly political; the way we choose to understand and teach reading has profound implications for our students beyond the classroom walls. Classrooms are social spaces just as the world is a social world. To read the world, we needed to acknowledge that we are in the world, not in some isolated classroom space disconnected from it all. In response to the unprecedented political climate of late, we have witnessed an equally unprecedented interest in engaging in political and public discourse. Some of this has occurred through traditional outlets – things that look a lot like “serious” texts. But some of it has also occurred through social media – a prime site of the spectacle. Faber tells Montag: “‘It’s not the books you need, it’s some of the things that once were in books.... The same infinite detail and awareness could be projected through the radios and televisors...’” (Bradbury, p. 78). There is a push to reclaim spaces from the spectacle, to make them sites for dialogue and for the sharing of experiences.

What has driven this? In large part, emotional response; in particular, troubling emotions such as fear, anger, and uncertainty. Faced with these, we could retreat to the spectacle, to the sort of superficial happiness of Montag’s world. Or we could choose, as millions are choosing, to engage the world, to use those emotional impulses as a starting place for dialogue. It is a

messy process, but one that has the potential to save us from the dire outcome of *Fahrenheit's* future, where we must be nearly destroyed before we can re-create.

Likewise, our classroom spaces can be reclaimed as a site to engage the world. CCSS-ELA need not define the full scope of our curriculum. We must both actively combat the authoritarian move of reading as spectacle while embracing the messiness and discomfort that comes with inviting the reader to read texts in the world. If we do not, we are complicit in denying our students' experiences and in denying their right to act as agents in the world. If we invite lived experience into reading, we create space for becoming and for praxis, for liberation and for resistance, for correcting wrongs and imagining new possibilities in both our reading and our living.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the end of the next section, I distinguish "information" from "informational text" and briefly discuss the different modes of reading each one."

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## Appendix

### **Key Ideas and Details:**

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

### **Craft and Structure:**

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5

Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6

Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

### **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:**

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.8

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

### **Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:**

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10

Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

*Figure A1.* Excerpt of CCSS-ELA-Literacy Anchor Standards for Reading. Adapted from “English Language Arts Standards » Anchor Standards » College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading,” by Common Core States Standards Initiative, n.d. Copyright 2010 by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers. All rights reserved.

