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Let's Re-Learn How to Read for the Common Core

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It's about time I said I was sorry to Professor Smith.

One of my most vivid college memories is of him rebuking my modern drama class for our lazy reading of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Why did no one notice, let alone try to analyze, the symbolism of Nora dancing the *tarantella*?

I felt terrible, and as Smith pushed us, I realized why he was so flustered: Ibsen had selected details like the *tarantella* (Not a tango! Not a waltz!) to articulate a controversial and groundbreaking message. We had skimmed.

Professor Smith, I want to make amends. The new national education standards called the Common Core are designed so that your students will now be better prepared for the type of analysis you expect — but to make that work, we'll have to start training teachers in the same way you trained me.

If we narrow the Common Core down to a handful of changes, one of the largest is that students will need to read texts much more attentively than ever.

According to the standards, students will begin analyzing figurative language in fifth grade; they'll tackle allusions in eighth. And these skills can't be taught in isolation, either — the Common Core asks us to create authentic experiences with text. Essentially, if you see a literature discussion in which kids aren't flipping through pages feverishly, the class likely isn't standards-aligned.

With that running start, I can easily imagine students picking apart the symbolism in *A Doll's House* by the time they reach your class.

Who knows, Professor Smith? Maybe this time they'll read Nora's dance as a wild and undulating metaphor for her decaying, oppressive marriage. If I can send you that kind of student, I'll feel better about having let you down.

But to teach students how to analyze text at that level, we need to train their teachers to do the same — and that's something we haven't done much of before now.

When I taught English, I'd gather the books I'd be teaching the following year and shutter myself in the library for the summer. I'd read them and re-read them and annotate the heck out of them.

You taught me that, Professor Smith. I knew if I spent that kind of time with books, they would tell me how and where to focus.

Not all of our teachers have this advantage. Our reading teachers didn't necessarily major in English. And even those who read voraciously may never have been pushed to do the kind of analysis your class demanded.

As a friend recently reminded me, English isn't easier than math — it's just easier to fake.

I accept full blame for leaving the *tarantella* uninvestigated, but you can understand why I thought that'd be OK. So often, our English classes stay at the level of making broad inferences about theme and characterization. Those discussions can be powerful and fruitful. If they're the only ones we conduct, however, class can wind up talking *around* the language of a book rather than truly talking *about* it.

The Common Core is a reminder of the credo literature professors live by. Language is the building block of great sentences, great paragraphs, great chapters, and great books. We cannot take it for granted.

So, it's time to help our teachers take their students back to the level of language. There are a few things schools can start doing right now:

1. We can give teachers a chance to (re-)experience close reading as students.
2. We can provide teachers time to discuss texts with each other. They need to reconnect with the joy of picking apart a text and flexing their analytical muscles.

Close reading is an acquired skill. We can require folks to teach it all we want; the proof is in the practice.

A few months back, [I wrote about a class](#) I took with [The Academy for Teachers](#): how it made me feel like an intellectual and refreshed my ability to analyze the language in *Hamlet*. The wonderful thing about giving teachers space to “geek out” about texts is that it respects them as thinkers and learners and lovers of the written word.*

And, not for nothing, it's serious fun. Imagine it: middle and high school teachers sitting down with an expert or experienced colleague to conduct close readings of the books they're going to teach.

This isn't just a passing fancy; it's going to influence all corners of U.S. education. The Common Core is quite clear that close reading is expected with science and social studies texts, too.

School districts — perhaps with the help of experts like you, Professor Smith — should create forums like The Academy For Teachers to help our educators dive into the language of the works we'll read with children. When teachers learn how to spot when a *tarantella* is not just a *tarantella*, we can begin to talk in earnest about how to bring that skill into our classrooms.

If we don't, our students will just keep dancing around the text.

** I want to give credit to Kate Gerson, New York Regents Research Fund senior fellow for Common Core implementation, who uses this perfect phrase for what we're asking teachers [and students] to do.*

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