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The Core in Common Between the Common Core State Standards and Sophistry:

A Critique of Curricular Deficiency

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Allison Mary Anziano

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Allison Mary Anziano

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

Peter Khost
Assistant Professor, Program of Writing and Rhetoric

Douglas Pfeiffer
Associate Professor, Department of English

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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With the release of the much-debated Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2009 followed by its adoption in the vast majority of the United States, the question of the standards' usefulness and validity has been at the forefront of the minds of K-12 educators, postsecondary educators, parents, students, and tax-paying general publics. The standards place the writing and reading of argumentative pieces above all other types of skills. While this in itself is nothing to be concerned about, the type of argument that the standards offer as exemplary is. I propose that the CCSS in English Language Arts and their supporting documents replicate the rhetorical philosophies of the ancient Greek sophists, a group dismissed and disparaged by their contemporary Plato for being inauthentic and relativistic, sacrificing truth in order to appeal to an audience. This resemblance becomes clear upon close examination: when the CCSS ask students to compose arguments in primary and secondary grades, little to no attention is given to the quality of their claims. Instead, the CCSS only make incremental distinctions regarding the quality of student writers' evidence. This suggests that the standards envision argument not as serving the end of a good decision (claim) but as a skill without differentiating how to use that skill in school or in life as a force for good.

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Hippocrates: And by what, Socrates, is a soul reared?

Socrates: Doubtless by learning. And see to it, comrade, that the sophist, in praising what he has for sale, doesn't deceive us as do those who sell the nourishment of the body, the wholesaler and retailer. For they themselves, too, I suppose, don't know what among the wares they peddle is useful or worthless to the body - they praise everything they have for sale - and neither do those who buy from them, unless one happens to be an expert physical trainer or a physician. So too those who hawk learning from city to city, selling and retailing it to anyone who desires it at any given moment: they praise all things they sell.

(Protagoras 313c-d)

Introduction

The pervasive Common Core State Standards, currently accepted in all but seven of the United States, are being pushed by public education reformers as the solution to solve our allegedly failing public school system. These standards were rolled out at a breakneck speed; after the standards were researched, drafted, and finalized in a mere fifteen months between the spring of 2009 and the summer of 2010, almost half of America immediately adopted the standards that summer due to fear of losing federal funding. After only four years since its inception, certain states, New York included, have intertwined the maintenance of school autonomy and teacher employment with student performance on CCSS-aligned standardized tests. Under the new regime of Common Core, New York schools deemed to be failing, as determined by numerical student scores from assessments, will have one year to demonstrate improvement, again,

according to the standards, or have the entire staff fired and the school “restructured” (“Governor Cuomo Announces Highlights”). New York teachers must avoid being rated as “ineffective” for three years in a row or be removed from their positions; this designation will be determined using a scale that is weighted heavily on the students’ CCSS-aligned test scores. Labeling a teacher as “ineffective” is meant to be a scare tactic for both faculty and families alike. What parent would want his or her child to be educated by an ineffective teacher? However, consider the recent 2014 case of fourth-grade Great Neck, New York teacher Sheri G. Lederman who, despite the fact that her students consistently outperformed state averages in math and ELA and the superintendent signed an affidavit asserting her excellence as an educator, she was branded as “ineffective.” Under the state’s new plans for accountability to the Common Core, Lederman, an award-winning educator, would have two more years to bring up her rating or else face termination (Strauss).

A document with as much sweeping potential influence on educational practices across the country as the CCSS deserves to be scrutinized, and many teachers, parents, bloggers, politicians, and scholars have risen to the task. Examining the Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) standards and their supplemental material reveals, among other things, that argument is central to these standards, as across the grades and subject areas students are required to formulate claims and support them with text-based evidence. The importance of argument in both academia and life beyond the classroom cannot be denied, as the popularity of the much-utilized textbook *Everything’s an Argument*, in its sixth edition since its publication in 1998, demonstrates. However, I propose that a closer inspection of the CCSS reveals that the true “core” of the ELA,

argument-based standards is a formulaic approach to the construction of arguments with little to no attention paid to their content. In other words, the Common Core requires students to craft claims and support them with evidence, but does not require students to critically examine the contents of their own argument for value or truth, or to respond to the arguments of others in an authentic manner.

While the Common Core is centered on the concept of preparing students for a college education or the workplace, the type of rote argument-creation is *not* what is required of college and career ready students, as explicitly outlined by writing and teaching experts in the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing.” This document, carefully written and reviewed by postsecondary and secondary writing instructors nationwide and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP), outlines both the skills and “habits of mind” that are necessary in order to achieve success in college writing, which spans across all disciplines in some way (“Framework”). According to actual postsecondary educators and experts in the field, college writers are expected to “analyze and act on understandings” and to “analyze a situation or text and make thoughtful decisions” (“Framework”). While the Common Core requires students to construct arguments, it does not encourage students to treat argument composition as an invaluable way to make decisions or “act on understandings” as the “Framework” does. Instead, the CCSS treats argument as an isolated, sterile assignment, a skill that can be mastered - “Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1). The CCSS only asks students to form

understandings while the “Framework” expects students to go further, analyzing those understandings for quality. By not requiring students to reexamine their own assertions, the Common Core does not appropriately prepare students for college and career, or, more broadly, life.

The Common Core’s lack of regard for an argument’s content bears a strong resemblance to ancient Greek sophistry, a form of argumentation that Socrates berated for its insincerity and lack of discernment of the quality of the argument’s worthiness. The group’s undesirable reputation is notably recorded by Plato in his dialogues; Plato paints the sophists as disingenuous hawkers of relativism. While the actual historical trustworthiness of Plato’s claims is nearly impossible to ferret out, mainly due to the ancient nature of the works and the lack of surviving written works from the sophists themselves,¹ the word “sophist” still rings with meaning in modern ears. Despite the likelihood of some historical inaccuracies or personal biases in Plato’s presentation of the sophists, the contemporary world has been shaped by his works to understand a sophist to be a man “who makes use of fallacious arguments; a specious reasoner” (“Sophist”).

In this thesis, I intend to utilize the term “sophist” to mean mainly the practices of the well-known sophist Protagoras as they are depicted in the Platonic dialogues with the focus being on “readers’ intuitions as to what the terms [sophist and sophistry] denote” as

¹ In his review of literature on the sophists, John Scoters-Zapico immediately mentions Everett Lee Hunt’s point of the tendency of historians to read the Sophists through Plato’s doubtful gaze and to give an account of the sophists, Gorgias in particular, as a “*reductio ad absurdum* rather than an interpretation” (353). Edward Schiappa continues this vein of thought by claiming “the practice of reproducing incoherent historical concepts is pedagogically unsound,” claiming it is irresponsible to rely on a “mirage” (5). This “mirage” that Schiappa crafts is the temptation to consider “sophist” a catch-all term, when, in actuality, it was used in both ancient and modern times to refer to thinkers that encompass a wide variety of traits. Schiappa takes great pains to debunk each allegedly defining characteristic of sophistry - the idea that a sophist accepted payment for his academic services and the so-called “implicit” traits of a sophistic speech, among others (8). However, Steve Johnson refutes this idea of lack of unity amongst the sophists by summarizing the sophistic views as “scepticism about objective knowledge; and commitment to teaching rhetoric” (202).

opposed to the factual accuracy of the life and beliefs of Protagoras, the man. (Schiappa 15) Based on this understanding, when the term “sophist” or “sophistry” is to be used within the confines of this paper, it is referring to the practice of being skilled in argumentation or rhetoric, not necessarily in supporting truthful claims, which is often ascribed, correctly or not, to the ancient orator Protagoras.

According to records about his teachings, Protagoras valued debate above all things considering all values to be “contestable” and fluid (Conley 5). For Protagoras, truth was “inaccessible” and thus not a useful idea to consider (Conley 5). Conley, and other scholars, describe the Protagorean line of thought to be “anti-logic,” since there is no “recourse to some objective criterion of truth or to some traditional standard of behavior.” Instead, the only way to determine what to believe is through listening to the arguments on both sides (5). Protagorean sophistry was problematic for Plato, whose philosophy famously supported preexisting, archetypal forms that a person could *access* through reason, *not create* through a personal opinion. While the Platonic viewpoint has mostly gone by the wayside in modern education, its critiques against complete sophistic relativism stand. If all is based on personal *doxa* (opinion), as Protagoras would suggest, then the inherent value or worthiness of the claim itself cannot be debated, or even addressed; all claims would then have value, regardless of their quality or truth. Additionally, if crafting a strong, weighty claim is considered unimportant, if not impossible, then all an instructor can attempt to teach is the skills associated with argumentation, not discernment of quality of the point actually being argued.

The attention the sophists paid to skills has come back to life in the advent of the Common Core and public education. In regards to modern education, Steve Johnson

writes, “skills are considered to be ethically neutral, avoiding questions of ends, and perhaps even truth,” which, for better or for worse, has become an integral aspect of any publicly funded school (201). Johnson continues and makes the leap across the divide of centuries by uniting the ancient term “sophistry” and the more modern concept of “critical thinking.” Johnson argues that both sophistry and critical thinking “eschew commitment to truth” and carefully evade the issue, if not flagrantly rejecting it (203). Modern education has reached a point where a skills-based education (take, for example, the education model the Common Core is pushing), is so widely accepted that the only point of contention is not about whether skills should or should not be taught, but simply how to best teach them (Johnson 203-4). In response to this point that Johnson poses, contemporary educators, parents, and students should respond with the same vital question: “But surely the ability to think critically about ends is a most desirable and important educational objective and an indispensable attribute for any critical thinker” (Johnson 204)?

As they grapple with the Common Core, contemporary educators, parents, and students should take a Socratic stance against sophistry; that is, they must question the explicit and implicit assumptions that the CCSS present about quality argumentation. Once the approach of the ELA standards is revealed as being inherently sophistic, then we can better understand their shortcomings and revise, supplement, or replace them accordingly.

Criticizing a Critical Thinking Curriculum

Consider the following scenario, proposed by Steven Johnson in his 1998 article, written years before the rumblings of CCSS began.

In a world where the *raison d'être* for teaching philosophy was the development of CT [critical thinking] skills, then texts would be selected, not in terms of their power or vision or historical significance, but because of discernible faults and fallacies...

Imagine that after studying Plato's dialogues the most important conclusion a student reached was that Plato was occasionally guilty of the 'error', a supposedly important error in CT, of using emotional or pejorative language when talking of the Sophists. (207)

Johnson imagines a dystopian future society governed only by critical thinking, in which students are not encouraged to consider the content of Plato's writings but to hone in on his structural choices only. While his use of the term "critical thinking" as a negative may seem difficult for some modern educators to accept, he uses the label as a general way of referencing a curriculum that does not encourage students to grow past the skill level. R. Owen Williams calls critical thinking "the first step in a larger process that we might want to call *constructive thinking*" (n.p.). While Williams does not discredit critical thinking, recognizing that the "identification of problems" is a significant part of a thinker's process, he does assert that it "is useful only if it gives rise to the *problem solving* of constructive thinking" (n.p.). According to Williams, the act of problem solving rests upon "an essential partnership between content and competency," or, to use

more common language, knowledge and skills (n.p.). He even goes so far as to state that skills are useless without knowledge, and vice versa. In other words, engaging in skills-based critical thinking—such as in the hypothetical case above, in which a student may observe a feature of Plato’s language but miss the point he is making and why it is important--should not be the sole goal of an education.

However, Johnson’s fears have come to fruition and Williams’ assertions have been non-influential in the creation of the nationwide standards. Engage NY, New York State’s official Common Core implementation hub, has interpreted the new standards in this completely skills-based manner, as evidenced by a close examination of the curriculum materials that are “aligned to the CCLS” (“New York State ELA Curriculum”).

In the Engage NY CCSS curriculum module for the tenth grade, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “A Letter from Birmingham Jail” is a central text. The text is introduced:

In this unit, students read Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter From A Birmingham Jail’ alongside three short poems, focusing on how King develops his argument for direct action on civil rights. Students will begin to analyze how central ideas emerge and develop in the letter and determine how King uses rhetoric to advance his point of view and purpose.

In the opening lesson of the module, teachers are warned, “Questions and activities in this unit are designed to reveal why King is writing the letter. It is not necessary for students to read or hear a summary of the historical context of the letter or

to read the statement to which King is responding before beginning the study of the letter as outlined in this unit” (10.2.1 Introduction). This is an inauthentic practice that operates under the guise that literary texts can exist outside of the situations that prompted them. This same disingenuous approach towards reading argumentative texts comes out again when students are asked to produce them. While the module does not address the “faults and fallacies” that Johnson mentions, the sentiment he expresses is present; instead of focusing in on a text for its “power or vision or historical significance,” students are only asked to look, in isolation, at the rhetorical moves MLK makes. While the civil rights activist is a masterful rhetorician, to be sure, it is a shocking request to examine a text that has resonated with so many with only the intention of dissecting its language, as opposed to analyzing “audiences, purposes, and contexts” and “act[ing] on [those] understandings,” as the “Framework for Success” suggests. While students who are truly college-ready must be able to “act on [their] understandings” of a rhetorical text, the module grants students no opportunity, based on the language of the introduction, for students to take an active role in the rhetorical process and respond to King’s ideas. The students’ main task is to report back on “how” King develops ideas or utilizes rhetorical techniques, while making no judgment on their effectiveness or worth.

Later in this lesson, this lack of depth continues. The module asks students to “engage in small group discussions to analyze how King unfolds his reasons for being in Birmingham. To support their analyses, students analyze the impact of King’s figurative language and word choices” (10.2.1 Overview). While this type of analysis is certainly part a rhetorical interpretation, students are asked to go no further in their consideration

of these reasons. There is no mention of analyzing the reasons themselves, only how MLK presents them in his letter. Perhaps, in their small groups, students should also raise questions of “What reasons might King have omitted from his letter to better appeal to his audience?” or “How might these reasons apply to current race relations in America?” Students need to be encouraged to question not only the structure of the letter but the actual content inside of and created by that structure.

The fourth lesson continues - “In this lesson, students reread and analyze paragraphs 6–9 of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’ in which King describes the racial injustice in Birmingham and explains why direct action is necessary. Students review these paragraphs through the lens of rhetoric and analyze how King uses rhetoric to advance his purpose. Students analyze the specific methods of rhetoric, such as descriptive language, appeals to conscience, and rhetorical questions.” Here, the lesson explicitly asks students to focus only through “the lens of rhetoric” when examining an emotionally charged topic of racial relations and acting against the injustice. Students only need to see how King “advance[s] his purpose” and are not asked to consider the validity or usefulness of this “advance[ment].” As Socrates might have said, it is like examining the salesperson’s pitch only for its craft and structure, never evaluating the worth of the product it extols.

In lesson six, students are asked to read a companion poem, “In This Blind Alley” by Ahmad Shamlu. The lesson explains, “In his poem, Shamlu investigates the human cost of living in a violently oppressive society, globalizing for the students issues that King discusses in his letter. Students analyze this poem to understand its central idea and to explore how Shamlu uses figurative language and word connotations” (10.2.1

Overview). The only concept students are responsible for mastering, as mentioned in this lesson introduction is a determination of the central idea. Students are to rhetorically analyze the work, which, based on its synopsis, seems just as emotionally charged as “Letter,” in order to pull out the central idea. Students are not asked to determine the validity of said central idea or to even agree or disagree with it. It is sufficient to merely be able to find it. With such provocative works of literature, it seems inauthentic to neglect to ask the students to engage with the ideas they are busy dissecting for word choice and rhetorical strategy. By doing this, students, as well as teachers, are “downgraded...to a species of technician” instead of maintaining their humanity (Johnson 210).

Examining the particular prompt from the module listed below is an exemplary example of how pure, sophistic skill work completely alienates students’ humanity.

How does King’s description of the “vicious mobs” and “hate-filled policemen” in paragraph 11 relate to Shamlu’s descriptive language in this poem?

(Student responses may include:

- They both describe oppressive and violent behavior.
- They both use violent verbs like “flog,” (Shamlu, stanza 2) “chop,” (Shamlu, stanza 5) “lynch,” and “kick,” (King, par. 11).

(10.2.1.L6)

The clinical nature of the exemplar student responses, as proposed by the module only skim the surface of emotionally charged texts while claiming to reflect deep evidence-based thinking. How can a person casually use the word “lynch” in a response

without evaluating the extreme psychological weight that the particular word carries with an entire nation? The use of “hate-filled policemen” is also uniquely jarring in our modern times. With long-latent racial tension erupting in the wake of police shootings of minority suspects in places like Ferguson, Missouri, how could a text like “Letter from Birmingham Jail” be read in schools without addressing these crucial concerns? It is an inauthentic exercise, because instead of asking students to evaluate their world in response to the ideas of others, requires an analysis in a vacuum. Yet, with the Common Core, isolated examination of texts is not only expected but also viewed as completely natural. M. D. Aeschliman calls this the separation of “facts” and “values,” with the assumption being that the former is objective and “empirical discourse about measurable facts,” which is given importance over the latter, the merely “subjective preferences, aesthetic and irrational personal tastes” (36). While values might not be quantifiable as facts, they are crucial factors in the development of an authentic rhetorical situation for a writer or reader - the personal stake that creates immediacy and urgency. One needs only to glance at the questions put forth by this module to see its dismissive approach toward the values of both King and the student reader with its whole-hearted embracing of cold and lifeless facts.

As the modules progress throughout the later grades, the prompts do build in complexity, as promised by the spiraling standards; however, students are asked to perform similar inauthentic, sophistic tasks as outlined in the “Birmingham” module. In the curriculum proposed for high school seniors, the summative performance task questions seem much more promising:

Is democracy the “last improvement possible in government” (Thoreau, part 3, par. 19)?

What is the role and responsibility of a government?

Who should have the power to make decisions in a society?

(12.2.Performance Assessment)

Judged by their own merit, these prompts have significant potential to allow students to make value judgments about democracy, government in general, and distribution of power. The texts that students will read in order to answer these questions are idea-rich compositions: Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience,” and Bhutto’s “Ideas Live On.” Unfortunately, the questions do not live up to their potential, as illustrated by the exemplar responses.

In “Civil Disobedience,” *Thoreau is clear* in his belief that the democracy “as we know it” is not perfect. *Thoreau writes* specifically about democracy in the United States in 1849 and how a government based on conscience would be superior to the existing government based on majority rule. Throughout the essay, *Thoreau develops* the idea that a better government is possible. In paragraph 1, *Thoreau writes* that the best government is one that “governs not at all.” Then, he writes that “when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.” These statements imply that the system of democracy in Thoreau’s time governs too much, and is therefore not ideal. In paragraph 3, *Thoreau says*, “I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government.” By demanding a better government, *Thoreau implies*

that the existing government is not ideal, and therefore, something better is possible. (emphases added)

This suggested answer makes abundantly clear that the curriculum module wants about-to-graduate high school seniors to be able to comprehend complex texts and restate the meaning of the text in a complex, evidence-based way by using integrated quotations. The claim in this answer is a restatement of Thoreau's thesis, not an original concept developed by the student and supported by the text s/he has studied. The italicized portions are all sentence starters that indicate a restatement of the author's ideas in a basic manner. Words like "writes" and "says" are included in a list of Bloom's Taxonomy action words under the "Create" division - the highest level of thinking - but are used in reference to Thoreau's ideas, not the student's. We already know and recognize Thoreau's thinking as complex and high-level; it is now the student's turn to think in a similar way, not just to parrot the higher-level thoughts of another thinker. An analysis of Thoreau's ideas should be the springboard into other, deeper, more authentic conversations about the very nature of government. Instead, this analysis is the superficial end goal.

The Truth of the Matter

As Protagoras the sophist assertively states, "I believe, Socrates, that the greatest part of a man's education is to be terrific at what pertains to verses. This means to be able to understand which of the things said by poets have been correctly written and which have not, and to know how to analyze them and give an account when questioned" (339a). Instead of probing the worthiness of the claim itself, as Socrates suggests,

Protagoras is content for his students to be able to understand what a writer is saying and tell others about it. If teachers follow the CCSS modules as written, they will be encouraging the same sophistic practice in their students.

This reductionist emphasis on evidence at the sacrifice of everything else - values, judgment, even truth- makes for a dispassionate type of response, at least if one follows curriculum modules like the examples described in the previous section. Sharon Crowley likens these formulaic, skills-based approaches of modern American education to the issues Plato raised against the “technical rhetoric of his day” (323), or sophistry, as he remarks that a rhetorician has “no need to know the truth about things” and, instead, only needs to “appear . . . to have . . . knowledge” (Gorgias 459c). Crowley continues:

Traditional composition pedagogy, with its emphasis on form and its assumed attitude of scientific detachment toward “subjects,” implicitly denies that some assertions are worth making, while others are not. Nuclear weaponry and abortion are on a par, as issues, with getting along with one’s roommate or the proper way to assemble a bicycle. If the students enrolled in such an instructional program choose to write about ethical or political issues that are of concern to them or their communities, they inevitably do so in the peculiarly sterile style that has become the idiom of classroom writing: “Abortion is murder for three reasons. . . .”

This type of writing “takes refuge in the logico-rationalist ideal of modern technical rhetoric, which, if pressed hard enough, will supply reasons to substantiate almost any position” (326).

While Crowley disparages the “technical approach” to writing as outlined above, she incorrectly does not ascribe this type of teaching and thinking to the sophists. While she does concede that modern education and sophistry are similar since they both instruct “students in discursive practice,” she clarifies that the sophists are not indiscriminate in what they teach (330). Instead of pursuing an ultimate truth, as Platonic works would encourage, a sophist would look for the best answer among many good answers. While this point is important, I would answer it with the idea that one must first distinguish the good answers from the bad answers, a value judgment that must be made before more qualifying distinctions can be made. Sophists seem to skip this first level of judgment, which make their reasoning appear to suggest that *all* answers are legitimate answers, and some are merely better than others. While Crowley does not recognize the sophistry present in her description of education, her identification of the “sterile style . . . of classroom writing” is important to mention. By making all issues on par with each other in worth, as a sophist able to defend all positions with equal skill would argue - civil rights become equivalent to roommate relations, abortion becomes equivalent to bicycle assembly. The distinctions between these extremely disparate arguments are lost. By examining each topic, it is clear that some are weightier than others, which translate to some claims being weightier than others, a fact that is overlooked in the standards and curriculum modules.

Argument expert Robert J. Marzano defines claim simply as “a new idea or an assertion” (80). However, he sidesteps the question of a claim’s worthiness by handing it over to the people, a very sophistic move to make. He credits the level of acceptance of a particular claim by the general public to be “the best test of truth,” quoting Oliver

Wendell Holmes Jr. (80). He then goes into the second aspect of an argument, the grounds. For Marzano, a claim need only be “valid,” which could imply anything from reasonable and convincing to merely defensible; the validity of the claim is conveyed by the evidence (80).

Marzano’s definition of claim dovetails with the Common Core’s definition of argument - to “seek to make people believe that something is true or to persuade people to change their beliefs or behavior” (Appendix A 23). This definition makes no distinction between alleged truth versus actual truth. According to the Common Core, an argument is successful if it makes the audience believe it to be true, regardless of the actual veracity of the initial claim. An argument is successful if it brings people to change their attitudes or actions, but there is no note of what types of changes in the audience should be encouraged. However, Richard Fulkerson, a scholar whose work is prominently cited in the standards, has a different definition. According to Fulkerson, the goal of argument is a good decision; this is a value judgment that implies that some decisions are better than others. If there are good decisions, there are also bad decisions. Following this definition, technically a person could make an argument for anything, but certain arguments are more plausible, stronger, or more worth arguing than other arguments. Despite prominently citing Fulkerson in the CCSS document, the sentiment captured by the standards is more in line with Protagorean sophistry. The sophist Protagoras claims that both sides of an argument are completely equal; the only thing that makes a difference is the listener’s personal *doxa*, or opinion and the evidence provided that sways the audience one way or another.

The core problem with treating argument as only evidence, as opposed to evidence supporting a strong, as opposed to a weak, claim, is best captured in the progression of the development of the standards themselves. In an analysis of the development of the CCSS as a policy, Lorraine M. McDonnell and M. Stephen Weatherford heavily focus on the use of evidence by the standards' creators. They contend that "policy entrepreneurs," like those responsible for the creation of the Common Core, "use research results selectively and even distort findings to advance their case" (3). The claim, or the policy, can be manipulated just as much as the supporting evidence, as policymakers can zone in on particular pieces of data, forge unlikely connections, or ignore certain information entirely in order to frame the problem in a way that is compatible with their desired solution. Diane Ravitch takes on this issue in her book *Reign of Error: The Hoax of Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*. The error that she speaks of is the artificially manufactured claim (she uses the term "narrative") that America's schools are failing and the Common Core is the answer. While she debunks various myths that education reformers use to support the Common Core narrative, a striking example is her deconstruction of America's failing test scores. According to Ravitch, while the popular claim is, "Test scores are falling, and the educational system is broken and obsolete," the reality is, "Test scores are at their highest point ever recorded" (44).

As former board member of the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), Ravitch explains how these tests, which are nationally administered to American students in order to track growth, have steadily increased in difficulty over the decades. These scores are published in scale score format and achievement level

format. The scale score is a number out of 500 that is used as “a trend line” (45). The achievement score, on the other hand, is an outside determination of where the score falls in the range of below basic (D or below), basic (B or C), proficient (A or B+), and advanced (an A+). While the scale scores have been steadily increasing over the years, particularly in math, Ravitch argues the forces behind school reform and the CCSS have misinterpreted, deliberately or otherwise, the achievement scores. Using the popular *Waiting for Superman* film as an example, Ravitch notes how director Davis Guggenheim claims that, according to the NAEP scores, “70% of eighth-grade students could not read at grade level” (47). Returning to the numbers, Ravitch reports that this claim interprets basic and below basic as failing. However, including the basic rating as sufficient changes the numbers significantly: 76% of eighth-graders at that time were basic or above. This practice of skewing evidence to support a claim is not new, but it is certainly a dangerous practice. Ravitch exposes the Common Core to be based on false manipulation of true data and evidence, which makes the resulting claim, the necessity of a new policy called the CCSS, faulty. If this distortion can occur with a national policy, it can certainly occur on a smaller scale with a student’s claim.

Since the Common Core itself is a claim that is an answer to a manipulated problem, it is not surprising that the veracity of the claims being argued is barely addressed in the standards themselves. Before ninth grade, students simply were asked to make claims of any sort and support them with either “logical” or “clear reasoning” and/or “relevant evidence.” This is only clarifying the type of acceptable evidence, not the type of acceptable claims. The process of finding strong evidence is so important that it is addressed in small increments across nine grades. However, the process of

developing a strong claim is only brought up by ninth grade; finally, a student is expected to have a “substantive” and “precise” claim, but, until that point, there was no qualifying word attached to “claim.” Even “substantive” is a lackluster word, meaning only “important” or “supported by facts or logic,” which harkens back to the quality of evidence instead of the quality of the claim itself (2). “Precise” is not much more remarkable, referring more to a claim’s structure (addressing a specific, narrow point to argue) as opposed to mandating its quality of content. Eventually, in eleventh grade, students are expected to make “knowledgeable claims” and be able to “establish the significance of the claim(s).” That means students in kindergarten through tenth grade will be reaching the standards if they make unimportant claims that lack intelligent thought or insight but demonstrate sufficient evidence. In other words, students are not expected to make quality claims - knowledgeable, weighty, and authentic claims- until they are almost college and career ready: graduation.

As directed by the Common Core, there is no scaffolding for how to teach students to grasp this idea of claim quality, while there are years dedicated to building students’ knowledge of evidence examination. A focus on evidence with disregard for the claim is a complete turn to sophistry. By barely differentiating between types of claims from kindergarten through twelfth grade, the quality of thought required to develop a strong one is demeaned and weakened. As Mike Schmoker and Gerald Graff warn, standards that “only perpetuate...lower-order” activities in the younger grades “postpone the implementation of the most important standards” and withhold crucial activities (33).

A Means to an End

The sophists were blamed for using convincing rhetoric to obtain a useful end. The goals of the CCSS also manipulate education as a means to an end, but an end of questionable merit. According to the National Governors Association and The Council of Chief State School Officers, the groups responsible for the Common Core Standards, and their standards-preceding press release “Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring Students Receive a World-Class Education,” “Education is a tremendously important lever for ensuring competitiveness and prosperity in the age of globalization” (5). The subtle metaphor linking a child’s school education with the implication of it being a tool, a lever, is important to examine. The implications of such a comparison are, in part, that education is nothing more than a means to another, more important, end - helping America compete economically with the rest of the world. For the NGA, knowledge is not the end game of a K-12 education. Instead, entering the workforce is a primary goal. To continue the metaphor, if education is a lever, then what is the fulcrum? A lever is useless without something on which to maneuver it. Without this, instead of a load-bearing tool, it becomes an unwieldy plank. This type of education, a lever with no fulcrum, is precisely what Plato warned of in his condemnation of sophists and their teaching practices. For Plato, the capital crime of the sophist was neglecting to distinguish good from better or bad from good; in other words, truth does not exist, and there is only the opinion of men. In the dialogue *Protagoras*, this paper’s opening epigraph, Socrates warns his friend Hippocrates about the dangers of the sophists who “praise all the things they sell,” those “things” being namely “learning” and knowledge (7). For Socrates, the sophist is “ignorant of what among the things they sell is useful or worthless to the soul” (7-8). In other words, the sophists are indiscriminate about the

content of their teaching, as long as it proves useful to their clients to get what they desire. The standards propose this same type of instruction, as long as it continues to supply competent, compliant workers to the American economic machine.

The true goal of the ELA CCSS is revealed in the “Foreword” section of the document. Students are not defined as future innovators or insightful thinkers. Instead, they are described as “workers” that will exhibit “knowledge, skills, and talent” that will make them “competitive with the best in the world” (1). The end goal of education is not to develop minds that can discern quality; instead it is to give workers applicable skills that are only valuable inasmuch as they are comparable to the skills of others in the world.

When it comes to considering the end, or purpose, of education, Neil Postman’s book, *The End of Education*, a work that, ironically, the Common Core prominently cites in its support of argument, explicitly addresses the issue. In his book, Postman prefaces his work by stating that he notices “most of the conversation [about schooling] is about means, rarely about ends” (x). Unsatisfied with this, Postman suggests that “without meaning, learning has no purpose” (7). However, the modern American public education system has lost its meaning, or its “narrative,” as our culture and associated values have changed. Since this decentering and fragmentation of national values has occurred, Postman posits that educators have “ignored the question” of what the new narrative should be “altogether, “ and instead “have focused their attention on the engineering of learning” (26). “There was a time when educators became famous for providing reasons for learning; now they become famous for inventing a method” (26). In modern times,

this “method” could easily be described as the Common Core and its accompanying curriculum.

Postman mentions particularly “the god of Economic Utility” as an insufficient focus for a public school curriculum. He finds it “uninspiring,” “passionless,” “cold and severe” (27). Despite these critiques, this is one of the main pushes behind the new set of core standards. In the standards’ precursory “Benchmark” document, the second sentence reads, “To meet the realities of the 21st century global economy and maintain America’s competitive edge into the future, we need students who are prepared to compete not only with their American peers, but with students from all across the globe for the jobs of tomorrow” (1). Further on in the “Foreword,” the document urges Americans to “seize this moment to ensure that we have workers whose knowledge, skills, and talents are competitive with the best in the world” (1). While some might argue that the standards themselves do not completely espouse these economic values, they certainly were integral during the developmental stages of the standards themselves. This is also evident in the initial draft of the CCSS, as the selling point was that students need to be “ready...for competition and collaboration” in order to expect “college and career success” (i-ii). This sentiment is maintained in the published version of the standards, as the online literature reminds parents that the standards are “designed to ensure students are prepared for today’s entry-level careers, freshman-level college courses, and workforce training programs” in order to be successful in “a world in which colleges and businesses are demanding more than ever before” (“What Parents Should Know”).

While this educational narrative of economic success may sound tempting, especially to the ears of hard-working Americans, Postman and others dismiss this “god” as unable to sustain a public education system. Postman’s initial concern about such an approach is its demoralizing nature, since such an educational narrative assumes students are nothing more than their occupations, and their “sense of worth and purpose is to be found in [their] capacity to secure material benefits” (28). The second issue Postman raises is the lack of evidence linking school quality to the productivity of the American economy. He continues to question the connections between the economic prowess of other countries and their educational success, which are in fact not always positively correlated. Diane Ravitch cites similar arguments in her quest to raise awareness of what she calls the privatization movement. While Postman bemoans the issues surrounding the worship of economics in a general way, Ravitch links this prominent educational narrative to the desire of the private sector to eliminate the public school system entirely in favor of for-profit charter and other private schools.

The Common Core standards seem to worship the gods of efficiency, materialism, and privatization. Unsure of what reason stands for education besides economic utility, the standards focus in an extreme way on the means of argument writing as opposed to the reason for arguing. The standards pay extensive attention to the types of evidence, but very little to what one should or should not be supporting with one’s argument. Wade A. Carpenter, a college professor specializing in teacher education, addresses this questionable idea of the worker as an end goal of education:

If the last century demanded that education channel kids toward the lower strata of an industrial world, twenty-first century schools may be

principally oriented toward preparing kids for an information age with sinister similarities: perhaps the vast majority of people will be information workers, rather than information producers or consumers. They may be processing and transmitting information, but with little responsibility for selection, nor opportunity for innovation.

(157)

Carpenter’s definition of the modern “worker” seems to be more accurate than we might hope it to be, particularly when we note the tendency of the Common Core to encourage the skill of recycling the claims of others instead of developing new knowledge and claims in response to those ideas. Through the comparison of the Common Core State Standards’ initial draft and final copy in Figures 1 through 3, a shift from knowledge to skills is apparent.

Draft	Final
<p><i>The Core Standards identify college-and career-ready skills and knowledge in reading, writing, speaking and listening across the discipline (i).</i></p>	<p><i>The Standards set requirements not only for English language arts (ELA) but also for literacy in history/social studies, science and technical subjects. Just as students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, so too must the Standards specify the literacy skills and understandings required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines (3).</i></p>

Fig. 1 - A comparison between the draft and final versions of the CCSS

In the original draft of the standards, both skills and knowledge are mentioned, albeit with skills listed first. However, the word “knowledge” doesn’t make it to the final version. Instead, the buzzword seems to be “literacy,” which is a fluid, catch-all word that could mean almost anything in the spectrum of information transfer.

Draft	Final
<p><i>What is taught is just as important as how it is taught; the Core Standards should be accompanied by a comprehensive, content-rich curriculum (i).</i></p>	<p><i>It is important to note that the 6-12 literacy standards in history/social studies, science, and technical areas are not meant to replace content standards in those areas but rather to supplement them.</i></p>

Fig. 2 - A comparison between the draft and final versions of the CCSS

In the draft, an extremely strong statement about content is made. In fact, quality content is equated with quality instructional tactics. This bold assertion is diluted in the end result, downgraded to a “note” that seems to be a throwaway.

Draft	Final
<p>They comprehend as well as critique. <i>Students are engaged and open-minded - but skeptical - readers and listeners. They work diligently to understand precisely what an author or speaker is saying, but</i></p>	<p>They comprehend as well as critique. <i>Students are engaged and open-minded - but discerning - readers and listeners. They work diligently to understand precisely what and author or speaker is saying, but they also</i></p>

<p><i>they also question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and assess the veracity of claims (iii).</i></p>	<p><i>question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and premises and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning (Introduction 7).</i></p>
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Fig. 3 - A comparison between the draft and final versions of the CCSS

This section originally only asked students to be able to “assess the veracity of claims.” This implies that there is some element of truth (veracity) in the claims, and this is the skill of a well-educated person. However, the final version expands the phrase to read “assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning.” This addition somewhat qualifies the original idea. Instead of focusing solely on the trustworthiness of the statement at hand, a college and career ready individual must also weigh the soundness of the reasoning. There are many claims that are untrue that are backed up by sound reasoning; walk into any criminal trial to see this in action. The addition of the second phrase “and the soundness of reasoning” deliberately muddies the waters, taking the focus away from the quality of the claim and adding more weight to the evidence instead.

While the reasons for these shifts in wording are not transparent, I would argue that the writers of the standards fully recognized the vital significance of a student’s ability to recognize and compose quality arguments based on essential content. By placing these concepts in the draft, the standard writers admitted their importance. However, by having these ideas remain on the cutting room floor, their deliberate transformation of educational ideals are revealed. Instead of teaching students to have

the hard knowledge to assess claim veracity, the standards require students to become literate, or skilled, in all areas in order to support claims of varying validity.

Conclusion

While an analysis of the Common Core’s draft and final version illustrate the diminishment of importance given to the value of the claim, Richard Fulkerson reestablishes the vital significance of the claim in argument by asserting that a major aspect of argument is stasis theory. With its roots in the work of Aristotle, stasis theory is “a classification of arguments by their purposes rather than by their strategies” (Fulkerson 37). A theory commonly used in criminal arguments, Fulkerson argues that by adapting this stasis approach, educators can construct a “basis for a modern rhetorical system of classifying argumentative discourses” that is “complete, useful, sequential, and elegant” (37). Fulkerson’s call for stasis theory is entirely based on the importance of the claim. His book, *Teaching the Argument in Writing*, is intended for high school and college-level educators, as it is published by the NCTE and independently reviewed by Jeanne Fahnestock as appropriately “nuanced and balanced” for the secondary or postsecondary educator (145).

In Fulkerson’s argument handbook, there are four chapters solely devoted to claims and various ways they might manifest themselves. This translates to over 30% of the entire book being dedicated to assorted types of claims. There are no chapters only dedicated to evidence; instead, the rest of the book outlines different types of argumentative strategies and approaches. All of these strategies include evidence as an important factor, but only in relation to the claim, premise, or thesis (term dependent on

the style of argument). This emphasis on the claim develops from Fulkerson's attention to both formalized and informalized logic in argument writing. For Fulkerson, argument is not just a claim and evidence. Instead, it is a delicate balance between the two that can come packaged in many different formats; these formats are what we should be teaching our students, both so they can compose them on their own and identify it the work of others. Logic-based arguments, regardless of the type, rely on the interplay between type of claim and type of evidence, not the extreme focus on evidence that Common Core has pushed.

Since argument writing has been at the forefront of education conversation due to its role at the front of the CCSS, it has been studied at length, along with its sophistic insistence on skills-based instruction. A 2013 study led by Deanna Kuhn begins with the assumption, "Arguing is central to reasoning, perhaps even its central objective" (456). With this premise in mind, she and her colleagues study how a dialogic approach to the skills of argument affect a student's capabilities in composing argumentative writing later on. The group's findings suggest that "there is more entailed in the development of argument discourse competence than the development of skills" (484). They argue that skills transfer will not occur unless students "are disposed to do so because they understand and appreciate their value," which, as Kuhn suggests, can be achieved through the use of her technique, conversation between peers (484). These findings further support the idea that much goes into the notion of argument; scaffolding is needed to achieve not only mastery of isolated skills but also transference of those skills in a college or career setting. Kuhn's study consisted of consistent work with the same group of students for weeks, and, while there was improvement, it was not a

miracle cure. The necessary skills “evolv[e] over time with sustained argumentative practice,” supporting the Common Core’s staircase of complexity theory (484). However, if attention is only paid to the development of skills and evidence and not discerning of good and better claims, the process suffers. As Kuhn states, students will be less likely to utilize a particular skill set outside of the strict confines of the classroom assignment unless the intrinsic value of the skill is appreciated (484). By undervaluing the significance of claim selection, students will leave the classroom unaware of the hugely important value that rests in that skill.

When probed by Socrates about the purpose of his teaching in Athens, Protagoras responds, “The subject in question is good counsel concerning one’s own affairs - how he might best manage his own household - and, concerning the affairs of the city, how he might be the most powerful in carrying out and speaking about the city’s affairs” (318e-319a). Protagoras, only concerned with teaching the skills necessary for each to carry out his “own affairs,” with no regard for what level of quality those “affairs” might be, the sophist continues with his pedagogy and influential pull on the youth of Athens. Like Protagoras, the Common Core State Standards concern themselves very little, if at all, with the quality of the personal affairs of the students it guides - as long as they end up positively for the “city,” or the American economy. As educators, we need to encourage our students not only examine the quality of the evidence employed but also to scrutinize the value of the claim. Without such rigorous discernment of quality, we, as a country, will be left worshipping a false god that will answer no prayers and obtain no results of improvement.

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