

11-22-2022

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Recommended Citation

Masterson, Jessica E. (2022) "Reading the Word, Not the World: A Critical Analysis of Close Reading," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 3 , Article 11.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2022.17.3.11>

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Reading the Word, Not the World: A Critical Analysis of Close Reading

Abstract

This article critically analyzes a Common Core-aligned English Language Arts curriculum with particular attention paid to the ways in which it constructs docile subjects in and through literate practices. Through a critical reading and content analysis of this textbook—one that the author was required to teach to her eighth grade students—this paper argues that under the guise of “college and career readiness,” the curriculum contained within the textbook represents a neoliberal approach to literary criticism, one whose ideology is evident through the material practices of “close reading” and in the disciplinary methods it employs in teaching students the “correct” way to read a text. In so doing, students become participants in a mass standardization effort that ultimately works to distort the myriad manifestations of power in K-12 public education today.

Keywords

secondary literacy, neoliberalism, critical theory

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Introduction

In late 2009, a consortium of U.S. state governors and public officials from the education sector developed and published the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a national set of curriculum standards that span from kindergarten through 12th grade. In line with the increased emphasis on standardized testing ushered in by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the CCSS have effectively redesigned pedagogical approaches to math and literacy. Even over a decade later, the CCSS are still the most relevant force in U.S.-based curricula, with millions having already been poured into CCSS-aligned classroom materials and professional development, and owing to the tacit re-approval of the CCSS offered by 2015's Every Student Succeeds Act (Eppley, 2019).

This article is concerned with the CCSS's impact on secondary literacy, and will specifically examine the way in which these standards are realized in a popular, CCSS-aligned curriculum known as the SpringBoard English Language Arts framework. Produced by the College Board, SpringBoard is utilized in 20 of the nation's largest 100 school districts and offers grade-specific student workbooks intended to move students through thematic units of study that "incorporate close reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language skills" (SpringBoard, 2014, p. ix).

This curriculum is analyzed according to Althusser's (1986) conception of ideology, in which a major concern is the connection between everyday actions and the ideological apparatus:

I shall talk of actions inserted into *practices*. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*. (p. 243, emphasis in original)

This formulation is key, as it provides a crucial linkage between the seemingly banal and ordinary things we do every day and their connection, vis-à-vis ritualization, to ideology. Indeed, the school itself may be understood as one sort of ideological apparatus, and along with it, the cottage industry of mass-produced curricular programs. But what are these specific actions within the context of these curricula? How are they inserted into practices that then become rituals, and to what end? To answer these questions, this article analyzes one such Common Core-aligned curriculum, with particular attention paid to the ways in which it constructs docile subjects in and through literate practices, most specifically the practice of "close reading." Through a critical reading of this textbook, this article argues that under the guise of "college and career readiness," the curriculum contained within the textbook represents a neoliberal approach to literary criticism, one whose ideology is evident through the material practices of "close reading" and in the disciplinary methods it employs in teaching students the "correct" way to read a text. In so doing, students become participants in a mass standardization effort that ultimately works to distort the myriad workings of power in K-12 public education today.

Ideology, Neoliberalism, and Close Reading

Althusser (1986) defined ideology as a "system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group" (p. 239). This system of ideas is intimately linked to class positions and distorts the relationship between a subject and their material conditions; thus, ideology is characterized as a "false consciousness."

Eagleton (1996) writes that literary criticism, and indeed *literature* itself, is an ideological project; the value-judgments used to interpret and critique a text are deeply tied to ideology, and “refer...not simply to private taste, but to assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others” (p. 14). Eagleton’s historiography points to Victorian England as an important time for literature, wherein the decline of the church left a need for a new kind of “social cement,” one that literature might fill. The focus of the ensuing efforts was mainly the middle class, and schools were looked to as the primary medium of cultural transmission. Merely presenting middle class children with the writing of a few elites was thought, in this way, to be a powerful force in inspiring a “noble spirit” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 21).

Embedded within this project, however, was a deep-seated concern for the maintenance of power among the upper classes. Eagleton quotes Sampson (1921) cautioning, “Deny to working-class children any common share in the immaterial, and presently they will grow into the men who demand with menaces a communism of the material” (p. 21). In other words,

Literature would rehearse the masses in the habits of pluralistic thought and feeling, persuading them to acknowledge that more than one viewpoint than theirs existed--namely, that of their masters. It would communicate to them the moral riches of bourgeois civilization, impress upon them a reverence for middle-class achievements, and, since reading is an essentially solitary, contemplative activity, curb in them any disruptive tendency to collective political action. (Eagleton, 1996, p. 22)

One cannot separate the study of English (or, in our case, an English curriculum) from this history; to do so is at best naïve, and at worst oppressive.

However, Althusser reminds us, “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (p. 242). Thus, the functions of literature described above –the communication of bourgeois morality, the deterrence of collective action – were carried out in, among others, the practice of close reading. The launch of the journal *Scrutiny* in 1932 by F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, and the era of “practical criticism” it promoted, paved the way for the formalist offshoot of New Criticism (also called American New Criticism), which combined a Kantian “disinterestedness” with the Southern Agrarian “belief in the superiority of a life lived in contact with the land and opposition to science” (Pickering, 2009, p. 94). A work of literature (and in particular, the poem) was positioned as an organic, complete entity, such that regard for content and context was ultimately subordinate to the sustained study of literary form (Eagleton, 1996, p. 3). So much import was given to this practice, that it seemed “the Decline of the West was felt to be avertible by close reading” (Wright, 1979, p. 48, as quoted in Eagleton, 1996, p. 30). The term “close reading” signals more than rigorous analytic interpretation, however: “It inescapably suggests an attention to *this* rather than to something else: to the ‘words on the page’ rather than to the contexts which produced and surround them” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 38). Without much regard for these contexts, then, close reading suggests that a text can be understood purely on its own terms.

Over half a century later, close reading is once again a fixture of the pedagogical main stage. “Drawing knowledge from the text itself is the point of reading,” proclaims the Publisher’s Criteria for the CCSS (Coleman and Pimentel, 2012, p. 1), echoing the notion of the text as a fixed entity. Moreover, David Coleman, president of the College Board and one of the major framers of the CCSS, famously dismissed the common practice of discussing a text’s social and historical context prior to reading as simply a way for students to *avoid* engagement with the text

itself (Ferguson, 2013). The CCSS as a whole “positions evidence extraction as the purpose for reading in school and is clear that close reading is the means by which this should occur” (Eppley, 2019, p. 340).

Further, while the CCSS does not offer a clear definition of close reading (Eppley, 2019), the way this practice is operationalized in CCSS-approved curricula, like SpringBoard, promotes the notion that close reading is “nothing other than a cerebral exercise in apprehending ‘meaning’ or in developing a disembodied skill” (Cobley & Seibers, 2021, p. 21). While some see the potential for close reading across primary and secondary education as a tool of equity (Hinchman & Moore, 2013), Hodge et al. (2020) note that the premise that “the fairest thing for all students is to be asked questions that ‘stay within the four corners of the text’...is not fully supported by research” (p. 28). Though I am not arguing against the practice of close reading *per se* (of course, careful attention should be paid to a text’s structure and language), the aim here is to explore some of the possible ramifications of treating a text as if only form matters, and teaching others to do the same.

Of course, since the inception of the CCSS in 2009, many educational scholars have been quick to point out the standards’ neoliberal underpinnings, wherein the policy solution that became these standards was framed “through economic, rather than democratic terms” (Brown et al., 2015, p. 138), most notably encapsulated in the mantra of “college and career readiness.” The market-driven mindset of the CCSS further “frames learning and education as individual rather than societal goods” and transforms the role of government into a mere ‘regulator’” (Brown et al., 2015, p. 139). Moreover, students –the obedient ones, at least –are viewed as potential earners and consumers. Francis (2006) links these market aims to the neoliberal “obsession” with academic achievement in public schools:

In order to facilitate such achievement among their pupils, educational institutions must be focused on this overriding credentialist principle and on successfully driving children towards academic attainment. Hence tropes of excellence and standards pepper policy documents and the speeches of education ministers, and a culture of ‘rigorous’ surveillance and testing prevails. (p. 190)

Importantly, this myopic focus on a narrow definition of achievement has extended in recent decades to include a corporate view of “accountability,” one operationalized through a hegemonic audit culture that permeates both K-12 and higher education sectors in the U.S. (Farenga & Ness, 2017; Johnson et al., 2005; Taubman, 2017).

While this state of affairs leaves much to be interrogated (see Apple, 2006; Au & Ferrare; Ravitch, 2013), in this article I focus on the way this neoliberal ideology is operationalized, and specifically, the CCSS’s intense focus on “close reading” as an essential 21st-century literacy skill. This approach, which harkens back to Formalism (and particularly the New Criticism of the mid-20th century), promises additional rigor, even as it denies the social relevance of literature – and thus, its potential to inspire collective action –through its insistence on the text as a unified whole.

But why the resurgence of New Criticism in schools today? Educational philosophers like Dewey (1991) and Herbert Kliebard (2004) famously distilled the various battles over curriculum that raged at the turn of the 20th century –and indeed continue to rage today –into one essential question: what knowledge is worth knowing? In the following sections, the SpringBoard curriculum’s answers to this question will be explored using three sample lessons

and activities from SpringBoard. In so doing, my intent is to articulate the ways in which the practice of close reading, in both its ritualization and in the disciplining of the body and mind it engenders, confers a neoliberal, ahistorical ideology that instills reverence for literary form over content, and quells authentic student inquiry.

Close Reading and the Ideological State Apparatus

“Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,” writes Althusser (1986, p. 241). However imaginary, ideology gestures toward reality as a means of cementing its apparent legitimacy, in a move that Althusser denotes as “illusion/allusion” (1986, p. 241). Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), like the SpringBoard curriculum, play a crucial role in this process as they promote a neoliberal ideology through allusions to real-world events and historical figures. These apparatuses operate as the containers of an ideology, and are responsible for translating the ideological into the material. Three SpringBoard lessons, described and analyzed in turn below, demonstrate this process.

Case 1: “Raising Awareness” Lesson

The “Raising Awareness” lesson (pp. 224-226) occurs in the third unit, called “The Challenge to Make a Difference.” As a self-contained curriculum, SpringBoard compiles excerpts of texts, as well as built-in learning objectives and tasks, into its student textbooks. Each page of the teacher edition of the curriculum is nearly identical to the student edition, except that it also contains instructions for delivering the lesson in the margins. In “Raising Awareness,” students read an article by George Clooney and John Prendergast, originally published in *Time* magazine, entitled “Famine as a Weapon: It’s Time to Stop Starvation in Sudan.” At the top of the page, the Learning Target is plainly stated for students: “Evaluate the effectiveness of arguments in print and non-print texts.” The lesson, like most, is broken up into three main parts: Before Reading, During Reading, and After Reading. Each of these parts in turn is organized around a central task. The Before Reading questions for this lesson are as follows:

1. Celebrities often champion particular causes in order to raise money, awareness, or both. Do you think celebrities can inspire others to take action about an issue? Which celebrities do you associate with issues of national or global significance?
2. In the following article, actor George Clooney and his co-author present an argument relating to the crisis in Sudan. What do you know about George Clooney? What do you know about this crisis?

A few things are notable here. The second question appears to invite students to reflect on their knowledge of the crisis in Sudan. The teacher’s instructions state that this should be done independently, and where previous generations of textbooks might provide a brief synopsis of the context, apart from the inclusion of an image of two sullen-faced Sudanese children, there is *no* context about the conflict at all, and the article itself assumes a general familiarity with the conflict and focuses on a suggested plan of action. Tellingly, the task for the During Reading portion of the lesson advises students, “As you read, analyze key elements of the argument.”

Finally, the After Reading questions are as follows (in numeric continuation from the questions above):

3. Who is the article's target audience? How do you know?
4. Based on the target audience, use your analysis to evaluate each element of the author's argument.
5. Overall, is this argument effective? Why or why not?
6. Find an online site (probably a ".org") that advocates help for Sudanese refugees. Use the below *[sic]* to take notes on the website you find and the elements of a multimedia campaign to create change.

Below these questions is a graphic organizer that comprises two columns, one labeled "Logos: Facts used to help me understand the issue," and the other, "Pathos: Images used to create emotion and to convince me to act." Students must jot down their notes about each of these persuasive strategies as they casually peruse websites about the Sudanese conflict. As is perhaps evident, the point of reading the article (as was prefaced in the Learning Target), based upon the questions students must answer and the activity they must complete, is indeed to evaluate the effectiveness of an author's argument, in this case Clooney's and Prendergast's. But in its overt focus on the structure of the argument, little is said about the actual content of the passage, nor the context of the years-long conflict in Sudan. It is almost as if the grainy photo of the two children that frame the article were thought to be all the context necessary for eighth grade students in any given region of the United States. While this harkens back to Eagleton's (1996) elucidation of the "reification" of the text brought about by New Criticism (p. 38), it also espouses a neoliberal logic: set a narrow purpose for reading, extract the necessary information (and *only* the necessary information), and move on to the next text. Any reflections a student might have about the nature of the content are highly individualized, and contained within the Before Reading section. What, one wonders, is the teacher to do if students should have additional questions about the Sudanese conflict after reading? There is literally no time allotted for discussion at any point in this 50-minute lesson.

To return to ideology, material practices abound throughout the SpringBoard text, both for students and for teachers. For the former, the predictable cycle of Before Reading, During Reading, and After Reading tasks conditions students to view reading as a linear process, rather than a dynamic one. For teachers, lesson plans follow a similar pattern, from Teach, to Assess, to Adapt. These phases of each lesson are clearly demarcated in large letters along the margins of the Teacher Edition, with accompanying instructions for each respective phase. In this cycle, teaching is positioned as a necessary precursor to the ultimate aim of assessment. Tellingly, the final phase of the cycle, "adapt," essentially provides ideas about how teachers might go about re-assessing students who failed the initial assessment; in the case of "Raising Awareness," the suggested adaptation is to provide failing students with a different article for which to answer the same questions again. These embedded practices –Before Reading, During Reading, After Reading for students, and Teach, Assess, Adapt for teachers –become "material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of the subject" (Althusser, 1986, p. 143). Indeed, the actions of "reading" and "teaching" are re-inscribed in SpringBoard as mere means to a neoliberal end.

Close Reading, Docility, and Discipline

Beach (2011) notes that a possible explanation for the utilization of close reading strategies that privilege the structure of the text above all else is the desire for simple assessment, namely in the form of standardized testing:

...the uses of certain forms in students' literary analysis or writing can be readily identified, for example, whether students can identify the use of plot structure in a story or whether in writing argumentative essays, they formulate a clear position statement with supporting reasons or counter-arguments. (p. 5)

Standardized assessments, it seems, demand standardized learning. Though at one point in time, English "was the most central subject of all, immeasurably superior to law, science, politics, philosophy or history," it is difficult to determine whether this standardization of teaching and learning suggests the inferiority of English in a STEM-focused society, or if it is all the *more* important to standardize the curriculum, from a neoliberal vantage, to ensure that the "right" skills and orientations are being instilled. What is less ambiguous, however, is the post-No Child Left Behind regime of incessant testing that characterizes the educational experience of public school students today. Michel Foucault (1995), in describing the school as an institution of the state, notes that it became

a sort of apparatus of uninterrupted examination that duplicated along its entire length the operation of teaching. It became less and less a question of jousts in which pupils pitched their forces against one another and increasingly a perpetual comparison of each and all that made it possible both to measure and to judge. (p. 186)

This is evident in the SpringBoard lesson rituals described in the previous section, particularly in the Teach, Assess, Adapt sequence that teachers are interpellated to enact in their daily interactions with students. But in training students' minds to read texts in certain ways, SpringBoard also *disciplines*. These rituals have a physical, bodily dimension in addition to their psychological ones, all of which work to construe and maintain docile subjects. These ideas will be further explored through a second case study from the SpringBoard text.

Case 2: "Historical Heroes: Examples" Lesson

Intended to stretch over the course of three 50-minute class periods, the "Historical Heroes" lesson (pp. 67-73) has three Learning Targets:

1. Analyze two sets of texts about two historical heroes.
2. Compare a poem of tribute to an autobiographical excerpt.
3. Draft a written response using the example definition strategy.

Here again, we see a similar pattern of learning goals that are not content-specific, and are instead geared toward identifying and replicating a specific skill. The Before Reading task also follows a well-trodden path:

You will next read two sets of texts on historical heroes. Before you do, take a moment to write down a sentence or two that tells what you know about the historical figures and events listed below.

Below this prompt are four terms: Civil War; Abraham Lincoln; Emancipation Proclamation; and Frederick Douglass. Once again, students are asked to record their responses individually, without any time devoted in the lesson to discuss these terms with peers or as a class. While the first day's activities are focused on Abraham Lincoln, with students reading Dr. Phineas D. Gurley's sermon at Lincoln's funeral as well as Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain," the second day's activities find students reading Robert Hayden's poem "Frederick Douglass," as well as a brief excerpt from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. After reading the poem, students are asked, "According to this poet, who is Frederick Douglass? Why is he heroic?" After reflecting on this question, students move onto the Douglass excerpt. The After Reading questions for this set of texts are as follows:

1. Compare Hayden's poem to Douglass's autobiographic narrative. What topic of the autobiographic narrative do you see reflected in Robert Hayden's tribute to Douglass?
2. Why does Hayden think that Douglass is worthy of his tribute?

As with our earlier case, little information is provided about either author, but though Hayden receives an "About the Author" blurb containing a few sentences of biographical information, the only information students have about Frederick Douglass is what they manage to glean from Hayden's poem and Douglass's excerpt, which details his escape from slavery. In this way, SpringBoard either seems to assume that all students have a passing understanding of Douglass as a historical figure, or believes it is not necessary for students to know much about Douglass beyond the fact that he was an escaped slave. If we recall briefly Dewey's (1902/1991) dictum that debates over curriculum are ultimately about what is worth knowing, SpringBoard seems to have supplied a few answers: example definition strategies are worth knowing, but an understanding of Frederick Douglass's life and achievements is not. Knowing the difference between different persuasive strategies is important; knowing about the armed conflict in Sudan—and the humanitarian crisis it has triggered—is not.

Discipline seems an apt term to describe the process of repetition that forms the backbone of the SpringBoard curriculum, one that spans from 6th through 12th grade and thus may come to define what "English language arts" means for a generation of students. According to Foucault (1995), discipline is achieved via docile bodies, which themselves are "worked" into such a state through various, ongoing means of control. Speaking specifically of the 18th century, he writes,

These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-unity, might be called 'disciplines.' (p. 137)

SpringBoard assumes the docility of the subject, and perhaps attempts to lull uncooperative students into a state of compliance vis-à-vis the soothing, predictable rhythm of each lesson. Through these repetitive movements, from before reading to during reading to after reading, from teaching to assessing to adapting, students' bodies are "subjugated, used, transformed, and improved" again and again (Foucault, 1995, p. 136).

Teachers' bodies are similarly disciplined; their movements are equally scripted as they monitor students' work. Discipline is realized in the highly detailed control of these movements, as well as through modality, which Foucault suggests

implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result...it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement. (p. 137)

The time, space, and movement of both teachers and students are indeed partitioned in SpringBoard lessons: the inclusion of a suggested pacing for each lesson reminds teachers to keep a brisk clip and makes it easier for administrators to know whose classes have fallen behind; the book itself acts as a container for all student work and de-legitimizes the validity of external student products; and in the material rituals of close reading, filling out graphic organizer after graphic organizer, recording answers to a never-ending stream of disinterested questions, classroom movements are keenly supervised. In these ways,

Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise...it is a modest, suspicious power which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy. (Foucault, 1995, p. 170)

The sorts of individuals that SpringBoard's disciplinary control seeks to "make" are ones who can tolerate long stretches of boredom, who don't ask their own questions (nor progress beyond lower-order thinking skills), and who treat texts as opportunities to practice discrete skills. In other words, SpringBoard is preparing "minds for market" (Kozol, 2005).

But as it works to indoctrinate students into the disillusionment of global capitalism, SpringBoard simultaneously works to stave off any hint of political unrest in students. As such, docility is also evident in the fact that the curriculum gestures to issues of oppression and human rights, but does not allow space or encouragement for collective action. For instance, although issues of injustice are implied in both case studies, the issues themselves receive very little attention. Ironically, while the theme of the 8th grade SpringBoard text is "Challenges," startlingly little attention is paid to the challenges of oppression stemming from slavery, or those caused by rapacious capitalism. Instead, SpringBoard gives these issues a customary hand wave by including them in the curriculum, but ignores its own complicity within a racist, capitalist society. It also works to prevent students from thinking *too* much about the content of the texts, both through its myopic focus on text structure and style and in the highly individualized nature of the lessons themselves. Foucault (1971) notes that "[e]very educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it" (Foucault, 1986, p. 156). In this case, SpringBoard appropriates the discourses of "diversity," "multiculturalism," and "social justice" as a means of furthering its own agenda. Indeed, this phenomenon is generally aligned with the social outcomes generated by the New Criticism of the mid-twentieth century, as Eagleton (1996) points out:

It drove you less to oppose McCarthyism or further civil rights than to experience such pressures as merely partial, no doubt harmoniously balanced somewhere else in the world by their complementary opposites. It was, in other words, a recipe for political inertia, and thus for submission to the political status quo. (p. 43)

“Partial” seems an appropriate word to describe the way in which SpringBoard presents social issues, and especially those tinged with the “funk” of race and class, to borrow a term from Cornel West (Mendieta, 2011). The final unit in the SpringBoard text, “The Challenge of Comedy” might provide just the “harmonious balance” needed to offset the distress students experience when reading about the conflict in Sudan, if they indeed feel anything at all.

Close Reading to What End?

Thus far, we have examined a few ways in which the objective of discipline conditions the material practice of close reading in the SpringBoard text, as well as the connections among this practice and the ideology of neoliberalism. In this section, I turn to one additional case study from the SpringBoard text to draw out a few previous themes, namely, the overemphasis of form over content and the co-optation of social justice issues in order to unearth some of the broader effects of the CCSS’s heavy emphasis on close reading.

Case 3: “Analyzing an Allegory” Lesson

This lesson falls near the beginning of the third unit, “The Challenge to Make a Difference.” The main topic within this unit is the Jewish Holocaust, and in this lesson, students are aiming for the following two Learning Targets:

1. Present a dramatic interpretation of a passage from the text.
2. Analyze how the themes in multiple genres are connected.

In the Before Reading section of the page, a brief definition of an allegory is supplied, along with these questions:

1. Review the definition [of an allegory]. With your class, brainstorm a list of more familiar allegories.
2. Why would authors choose to use an allegory to tell a story?

The focus on allegory continues into the During Reading portion of class, in which students listen to a “dramatic reading” of *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust*. As they listen, students are to

1. Take notes on the animals’ reactions to the Terrible Things. Use the graphic organizer on the next page for your notes.
2. Think about why a children’s story of the Holocaust is best told as an allegory.

Eagleton (1996) appears to anticipate this very lesson in his descriptions of the primary concerns of the Formalists:

content was merely the 'motivation' of form, an occasion or convenience for a particular kind of formal exercise... *Animal Farm* for the Formalists would not be an allegory of Stalinism; on the contrary, Stalinism would simply provide a useful opportunity for the construction of

an allegory. (p. 3)

In the case of “Analyzing an Allegory,” the Jewish Holocaust is positioned as a “useful opportunity” to discuss allegories with eighth grade students. Once again, a topic that might otherwise provide a chance to delve into discussions around other historical and contemporary genocides is summarily reduced to a study of its formal structure. The only connection students are allowed to make in this lesson is among genres. Gilbert (2014) sees this pattern as part and parcel of our neoliberal times, noting that “[b]roader social and political forces have made the CCSS more than misguided, yet manageable, curricular standards. In truth, they function as an overbearing instrument of standardization” (p. 29). This standardization might be thought of as a sort of *narrowing*, eclipsing possibilities for teaching and learning as it further confines the possibilities for subjectivity. In Althusserian terms, subjectivity only occurs within ideology; through Ideological State Apparatuses, individuals are interpellated as seemingly free subjects who tend to “work all right ‘all by themselves’” precisely because they believe themselves to be free (Althusser, 1986. p. 248).

Thus, in posing the question, “To what end?” I am suggesting that SpringBoard teaches students and teachers to “(freely) accept” their subjection as they enact and embody repetitive exercises, ones that do not ever “culminate in a beyond, but tend towards a subjection that has never reached its limit” (Foucault, 1995, p. 162). The disciplinary coercion involved in this subjection “establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination” (Foucault, 1995, p. 138). As such, an ever-increasing domination is the ultimate end, which is to say, there is no end.

Discussion

When we consider the SpringBoard text in its entirety, Althusser’s “problematic” (Adams & Searle, 1986, p. 238) is particularly useful here, as the infrastructure of this text is geared toward quick consumption of isolated pieces of information that add up to the promulgation of a capitalist approach to problem-solving; these are the skills of “college and career readiness” and “21st century learning.” In this way, SpringBoard –as well as the multimillion-dollar curriculum industry itself –is an embodiment of “the enterprising and constantly strategizing entrepreneur,” wrought “out of the possessive individualism it establishes as the ideal citizen” (Apple, 2009, p. 241).

In spotlighting the material practice of close reading as it is performed, monitored, and assessed in one curriculum, I hope to have shed some critical light on the myriad ways in which ideology inheres in even the smallest actions. Proceeding from the point that there can be no reading of a work –however close –“which is not also a ‘re-writing’” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 11), I have consciously attempted in this article *not* to position these entangled interworkings and effects of power in adversarial terms, mainly because of Foucault’s (1995) persuasive argument in favor of just the opposite:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (p. 194)

The most essential question stemming from this article, then, may not concern the negative consequences of close reading as an ideological practice; rather, it is perhaps more fruitful moving forward to examine what it is that close reading *produces*. I have suggested it produces market-ready students and de-professionalized teachers, that it provides a system of constant surveillance, in that the respective abilities of students and teachers to fulfill their roles are constantly assessed. Finally, I have suggested that it produces docile bodies accustomed to lives lived comfortably “*dans le vrai* (within the true)” (Foucault, 1986, p. 155). In sum, the abject lack of meaningful opportunities for either students or teachers to contend deeply and meaningfully with any topic or idea is indeed the point, and further contributes to the epistemicide of higher order knowledge and critical thought in K-12 education. This bleak picture notwithstanding, it is perhaps important to close on a note of hope: some teachers and students, after all, will continue to resist their relative positioning in the neoliberal public school. Gerard (2015) suggests that the desire for some semblance of community will temper market-based reforms, as community

cannot be creatively conceived or experienced purely through quantitative measures or values. The desire for ‘the public’...is a claim to a purpose for education that extends beyond capital and to broader notions of self and community, pointing to the limit points of contemporary policy rationalities. (p. 857)

In the meantime, however, we must continue to interrogate the ideologies inherent in our every action, even (and especially) the micro-movement of pupils scanning a page.

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