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Closing in on Close Reading

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We can't wait until middle school to teach students to read closely. Three practices bring close reading to the lower grades.

A significant body of research links the close reading of complex text—whether the student is a struggling reader or advanced—to significant gains in reading proficiency and finds close reading to be a key component of college and career readiness. (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2011, p. 7)

When I read this statement in the content frameworks of one of the consortia now creating assessments for the Common Core State Standards, I was frankly a little insulted. *Of course* I teach students to read closely—both my university students and younger students, through my literacy consultant work. But on closer examination, I realized I may not be encouraging students to read closely enough to meet the expectations set by these standards. Exactly what do the Common Core standards mean by close reading? And what principles and practices should guide us as we implement close reading in the classroom—particularly in elementary classrooms?

Much of the available information about close reading centers on secondary schools, where this skill seems to fit most comfortably. By the time students are in these later grades, they are more inclined to think abstractly. They read complicated texts by great authors that beg for careful analysis. But close reading can't wait until 7th grade or junior year in high school. It needs to find its niche in kindergarten and the years just beyond if we mean to build the habits of mind that will lead all students to deep understanding of text.

What Is Close Reading?

Essentially, close reading means reading to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) supplies clarification useful for teaching with Common Core standards in mind:

Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole. (PARCC, 2011, p. 7)

If reading closely is the most effective way to achieve deep comprehension, then that's how we should teach students to read. But that description doesn't match much of the instruction I've witnessed in recent years.

Why Close Reading Now?

I wear a variety of professional hats—university professor, literacy consultant to districts, author of several books related to comprehension. To keep myself honest (and humble), I spend a lot of time in classrooms watching kids and teachers at work. During the past decade, I've observed a transformation in the teaching of reading from an approach that measured readers' successful understanding of text through lengthy packets of comprehension questions to one that requires students to think about their thinking, activating their "good reader" strategies. The National Assessment of Educational Progress even made one of those strategies—making reader/text connections—a thinking strand within its framework (National Assessment Governing Board, 2002). For a long while, this approach looked ideal. What could be better than creating metacognitive readers?

But the teaching of reading veered significantly off track when those personal connections (also well represented on some high-stakes state assessments) began to dominate the teaching and testing of comprehension, often leaving the text itself a distant memory. And it got even crazier. I wish I could say that the time I overheard a teacher say, "If you don't have a real connection, make one up" was an isolated incident.

Although well-intentioned, the shift to teaching reading as a set of thinking strategies too often left readers with the notion that the text was simply a launching point for their musings, images that popped into their heads, and random questions that, in the end, did little to enhance their understanding of the text itself.

So if responding personally to text isn't leading students to deeper understanding, then where should teachers turn to help students improve their comprehension? We should turn to the text itself.

Enter close reading.

Reread that PARCC definition of close reading—closely—to extract key concepts. You might identify these ideas: examining meaning thoroughly and analytically; directing attention to the text, central ideas, and supporting details; reflecting on meanings of individual words and sentences; and developing ideas over the course of the text. Notice that reader reflection is still integral to the process. But close reading goes beyond that: The best thinkers do monitor and assess their thinking, but in the context of processing the thinking of others (Paul & Elder, 2008)

Great, you may be thinking. I reread that passage. I processed. I monitored. And I agree that close reading will likely produce deeper understanding. But how do I get these concepts off the page and into my elementary school classroom? Here are three fruitful practices.

Use Short Texts

Most teachers subscribe to the belief that when students can read longer text, that's what they should read. Although we don't want to abandon longer texts, we should recognize that studying short texts is especially helpful if we want to enable students with a wide range of reading levels to practice closely reading demanding texts (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012).

The Common Core standards suggest several genres of short text, both literary and informational, that can work at the elementary level. Many kinds of traditional literature—folktales, legends, myths, fables, as well as short stories, poetry, and scenes from plays—enable and reward close reading. For informational works, try short articles, biographies, personal narratives, and even some easier primary-source materials, such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, or sayings from *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards notes numerous picture books that can be used with younger readers. Because children's listening comprehension outpaces their reading comprehension in the early grades, it's important that your students build knowledge through being read to as well as through independent reading, with the balance gradually shifting to silent, independent reading.

When students are learning a process, such as how to search for a recurring theme, reading short texts allows them to make more passes through the entire sequence of a text. It could take weeks or even months to read through a 100-page novel to identify a theme or concepts related to the text as a whole. A short text of a page or two can be digested in one lesson.

Aim for Independence

Go Beyond "Ho-Hum" Questions

It's our responsibility as educators to build students' capacity for *independently* comprehending a text through close reading. There's some controversy, however, as to how we should go about doing this.

One organization, Student Achievement Partners—until recently led by David Coleman, a lead author of the Common Core standards—suggests that we accomplish this through "text-dependent questions." Coleman and colleagues (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012) advocate asking a sequence of questions that will lead students more deeply into a text. As an example, the organization's website presents this series of questions for 3rd graders, referring to the equivalent of 11 very sparse pages taken from Chapters 6 and 7 of Kate DiCamillo's novel *Because of Winn-Dixie* (Candlewick,

2000):

- Why was Miss Franny so scared by Winn-Dixie? Why was she "acting all embarrassed"?
- How did the Herman W. Block Memorial Library get its name?
- Opal says, "She looked sad and old and wrinkled." What happened to cause Miss Franny to look this way?
- What were Opal's feelings when she realized how Miss Franny felt?
- Earlier in the story, Opal says that Winn-Dixie "has a large heart, too." What does Winn-Dixie do to show that he has a "large heart"?
- Opal and Miss Franny have three very important things in common. What are these? (Student Achievement Partners, 2012)

The culminating task for this exemplar activity is to explain in writing why *Because of Winn-Dixie* is an appropriate title.

These are decent questions, requiring both literal and inferential thinking, but they fall short in several ways. First, none of them will generate real discussion; they all have basically a right answer, even those that don't call for verbatim "facts" from the story. Second, they are fairly ho-hum as questions go, sticking closely to the kinds of things we typically ask young readers. And asking students to justify a title when they have 19 more chapters to read seems a bit premature if you're looking for deep thinking based on the best evidence.

Most of these questions align only with Common Core English Language Arts and Literacy Anchor Standard 1: finding evidence in the text. A couple of the questions address characters' feelings (Standard 3); and the last question delves into the author's message (Standard 2). But we didn't need the Common Core standards to push us to ask questions like these. Teachers are already quite good at asking questions about *what* the author is saying.

Entirely missing from this question set is anything related to craft and structure (Standards 4–6) and integration of knowledge and ideas (Standards 7–9)—areas that are so often neglected, as the developers of the standards acknowledge. I would probe 3rd graders' thinking with questions like these:

- In these chapters, the author repeats a few phrases, like, "My daddy was a rich man, a very rich man." Why does the author do this? Find more repeated phrases. What effect do these have on the meaning of the story? (Standard 4: the use of language)
- In Chapter 7, Miss Franny Block tells Opal the story of the bear from long ago. Why do you think the author stops the action of the story to go back in time like this? What might not have happened if Franny Block hadn't told this story? (Standard 5: text structure)
- What is Franny Block's point of view about Winn-Dixie by the end of Chapter 7? What is the evidence? Where does her point of view change? (Standard 6: point of view)

Questions related to the integration of knowledge and ideas might be better posed later in the book, after students have digested more of the text's content. But the craft and structure questions I've suggested could be asked at any time—and they get much closer to the range of rigor to which the Common Core standards aspire.

The final, most compelling reason I don't care for the Student Achievement Partners questions is that although they teach the reading—the content of the text—there's no attempt to teach the reader strategies by which that reader can pursue meaning independently, yes independently (notice my repetition for emphasis modeled after *Because of Winn-Dixie*).

Teach Students to Ask the Questions

Teaching is about transfer. The goal is for students to take what they learn from the study of one text and apply it to the next text they read. If all we're doing is asking questions about *Winn-Dixie*, readers will probably have a solid understanding of that book by the last page—certainly an important goal. But those questions, even the ones I posed, don't inform the study of subsequent books.

How can we ensure that students both reap the requisite knowledge from each text they read and acquire skills to pursue the meaning of other texts independently? I suggest we coach students to ask themselves four basic questions as they reflect on a specific portion of any text, even the shortest:

- What is the author *telling* me here?
- Are there any hard or important *words*?
- What does the author want me to *understand*?
- How does the author play with *language* to add to meaning?

If students take time to ask themselves these questions while reading and become skillful at answering them, there'll be less need for the teacher to do all the asking. For this to happen, we must develop students' capacity to observe and analyze.

Focus on Observing and Analyzing

First things first: See whether students have noticed the details of a passage and can recount those details in their own words. Note that the challenge here isn't to be brief (as in a summary); it's to be accurate, precise, and clear.

The recent focus on finding evidence in a text has sent students (even in primary grades) scurrying back to their books to retrieve a quote that validates their opinion. But to paraphrase what that quote means in a student's own language, rather than the author's, is more difficult than you might think. Try it with any paragraph. Expressing the same meaning with different words often requires going back to that text a few times to get the details just right.

Paraphrasing is pretty low on Bloom's continuum of lower- to higher-order thinking, yet many students stumble even here. This is the first stop along the journey to close reading. If students can't paraphrase the basic content of a passage, how can they dig for its deeper meaning? The second basic question about hard or important words encourages students to zoom in on precise meaning.

When students are satisfied that they have a basic grasp of what the author is telling them, they're ready to move on to analyzing the fine points of content. If students begin their analysis by asking themselves the third question—What does the author want me to understand in this passage?—they'll be on their way to making appropriate inferences, determining what the author is trying to show without stating it directly. We might encourage students to ask themselves questions like these:

- Who is speaking in the passage?
- Who seems to be the main audience? (To whom is the narrator speaking?)
- What is the first thing that jumps out at me? Why?
- What's the next thing I notice? Are these two things connected? How? Do they seem to be saying *different* things?
- What seems important here? Why?
- What does the author mean by _____? What exact words lead me to this meaning?
- Is the author trying to convince me of something? What? How do I know?
- Is there something missing from this passage that I expected to find? Why might the author have left this out?
- Is there anything that could have been explained more thoroughly for greater clarity?
- Is there a message or main idea? What in the text led me to this conclusion?
- How does this sentence/passage fit into the text as a whole?

Students who learn to ask themselves such questions are reading with the discerning eye of a careful reader. We can also teach students to read carefully with the eye of a writer, which means helping them analyze craft.

How a text is written is as important as the content itself in getting the author's message across. Just as a movie director focuses the camera on a particular detail to get you to view the scene the way he or she wants you to, authors play with words to get you to see a text *their* way. Introducing students to some of the tricks authors use opens students' minds to an entirely new realm in close reading.

Figure 1 on p. 39 provides a list of craft techniques to which we might introduce students to encourage close reading, along with questions that might help students explore how an author uses each craft in a text.

FIGURE 1. Craft Techniques and Related Questions for Close Reading

Craft Technique	Possible Questions
Imagery, including comparisons:	What is being compared?
	Why is the comparison effective? (typically because of the clear, strong, or unusual connection between the two)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similes • Metaphors • Personification • Figurative language • Symbols 	What symbols are present? Why did the author choose these symbols?
	What word(s) stand out? Why? (typically vivid words, unusual choices, or a contrast to what a reader expects)
	How do particular words get us to look at characters or events in a particular way? Do they evoke an emotion?
Word choice	Did the author use nonstandard English or words in another language? Why? What is the effect?
	Are there any words that could have more than one meaning? Why might the author have played with language in this way?

Tone and voice	<p>What <i>one</i> word describes the tone?</p> <p>Is the voice formal or informal? If it seems informal, how did the author make it that way? If it's formal, what makes it formal?</p> <p>Does the voice seem appropriate for the content?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence structure • Short sentence • Long sentences • Sentence fragments • Sentences in which word order is important • Questions 	<p>What stands out about the way this sentence is written?</p> <p>Why did the author choose a short sentence here? (for example, so it stands out from sentences around it, for emphasis)</p> <p>Why did the author make this sentence really long? (for example, to convey the "on and on" sense of the experience.)</p> <p>Why did the author write a fragment here? (for example, for emphasis or to show a character's thoughts)</p> <p>Based on the order of the words in this sentence, which word do you think is the most important? Why? What was the author trying to show by placing a particular word in a certain place?</p>

Getting students to ask themselves the four general questions and the more specific questions about content and craft is a long-term goal. If we want to create close readers who are also independent readers, we need to explicitly teach how to approach a text to uncover its multiple layers of meaning. In the meantime, we'll need to come to class prepared to ask important text-dependent questions when students' own questioning fails to produce a deep understanding. But those questions need to be more than "text-dependent"; they need to represent the full range of the Common Core standards.

College and career readiness begins in the primary grades. With the right tools, we can build close reading skills even with our youngest readers.

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