

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.