



**Close Reading and Far-Reaching  
Classroom Discussion:  
Fostering a Vital Connection**

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# Close Reading and Far-Reaching Classroom Discussion: Fostering a Vital Connection

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One of the widespread anticipatory reactions to the Common Core State Standards is a new emphasis in guidance to practitioners on “close reading” (Brown & Kappes, 2012). Close reading is an approach to teaching comprehension that insists students extract meaning from text by examining carefully how language is used in the passage itself. It stems from the observation that many students emerging from the K-12 world are not ready to engage with complex text of the kind they must work with in college. Its ultimate goal is to help students strengthen their ability to learn from complex text independently, and thus to enhance college and career readiness.

A characteristic of the implementation of close reading in classrooms is a prohibition on questions that draw on resources outside the text and a focus on support for claims from the text itself. It is argued by some that close reading will level the playing field by eliminating differences in comprehension associated with background knowledge.

In this brief we examine the basis for this view, and consider the advantages as well as the limitations of close reading. We also suggest ways in which close reading might be usefully supplemented by other classroom practices, to ensure that it supports comprehension and to avoid problems we anticipate from an excessive focus on close reading, such as student frustration, a decline in motivation to read, and reduction in opportunities to learn content.

## An Antidote to ‘Avoiding’ the Text?

Close reading has been proposed as a healthy antidote to familiar classroom practices which are demonstrably not helpful in teaching students how to comprehend complex

texts (Pearson, 2013). Those practices include, in the elementary grades, considerable anticipatory work before the texts are broached.

For example, a familiar approach to illustrated narrative texts is to start with a ‘picture walk’ (Clay, 1991; Fountas & Pinell, 1996), constructing the story from the pictures before considering the text. This practice is assumed to pique students’ interest and to build their abilities to predict and interpret—useful capacities, but no reason to limit access to the text itself as a basis for predicting and interpreting.

Expository texts are often introduced using the ‘K-W-L sequence’ (Ogle, 1986) in which students—before reading a book about, for example, owls—list collectively what they already **know** about owls and then what they **wonder** or **wish to know**, before actually reading the book to **learn**. Close reading advocates argue, with some justification, that practices like these divert student time and attention from the actual texts, and students would profit more from struggling directly with the text en route to improving comprehension skills.

In the secondary grades, when content area texts often are deemed difficult and unengaging, teachers may well avoid confrontation with their students’ comprehension challenges by reading required texts aloud, by engaging in more advanced versions of K-W-L approaches (Huffman, 1998), by lecturing on the content rather than expecting students to read it, or by providing only brief texts associated with hands-on activities. These practices may be effective in ensuring students are exposed to required content, but they do not support students in learning to read the complex texts required in the content areas. A key argument in support of close reading is that practices like those sketched above

about students' opportunities to learn to struggle with text, which is a natural process that all good readers engage in at times and thus need to learn. Anything that diverts attention from text, or 'works around the text,' it is argued, is likely to be counterproductive in the long run. It is thus understandable that close reading be advocated as a corrective to these text-avoidance approaches.

Close reading of complex text has taken on a particular importance to some educators who focus on the inequities encountered by English learners, who rarely are given the opportunity to grapple with complex text. They argue that close reading, even though it may be challenging, is preferable to the oversimplified texts usually given to ELLs, texts that lack the richness and complexity of the source texts.

## Claims of a More Level Playing Field

An even more central argument offered in support of close reading is that it 'levels the playing field' by focusing on questions that can be answered with reference to the text, thereby eliminating—as a factor determining success in reading comprehension—differences among students in background knowledge or cultural capital. Clearly, leveling the playing field is a desirable outcome. If we had an approach to reading instruction that enabled children from language- and literacy-poor backgrounds to perform as well as those from more advantaged backgrounds, we should certainly embrace it.

## Four Objections to Widespread Reliance on Close Reading

On the other hand, objections can be raised to a widespread reliance on close reading as the primary comprehension-fostering practice. We consider four such objections here.

- **First, the justification that close reading levels the playing field by eliminating the effect of differences in background knowledge can be shown to be simply wrong on the basis of what we know about reading comprehension.** It's an appealing fantasy, but that's all it can ever be. Close reading does not address the most important reasons readers struggle, which are lack of background knowledge and lack of familiarity

with key vocabulary and low-frequency academic language constructions.

- **Second, close reading is a painstaking process that is likely to seem tedious and unmanageable to already demotivated struggling middle and high school readers.** If teachers rely on it too heavily, or use it to the exclusion of other comprehension-building activities, it may lose what useful qualities it has. Close reading (like other forms of reading, from scanning to browsing to reading for plot or reading for voice or reading to copy-edit) is useful in particular cases and for particular purposes. Indeed, it can be a powerful and transformative experience, taking the reader inside not only the contents of the text, but the writer's process of constructing it.

In David Coleman's brief but impassioned discussion of MLK's *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* (<http://vimeo.com/25242442>), one gets a reminder of the most transcendent moments of close reading. The "right and ability to slow down" is a powerful draw for those of us who want to see our students all engage deeply with text and enjoy the process. But if used unskillfully as a general-purpose approach to reading comprehension, it may actually worsen the conditions we seek to change.

- **Third, reliance on close reading privileges text-based evidence over other sources of evidence that are equally justifiable.** We do not downplay the value of text-dependent questions and text-based answers in building arguments, but neither are we willing to anoint them as the only legitimate source. Prior knowledge, moral judgment, social norms, and other sources of information and analysis constitute legitimate bases from which to argue, and in authentic argumentation are often needed as complements to text-based evidence.
- **Fourth, and perhaps most important, over-emphasis on close reading may naturally work to the detriment of another CCSS focus, classroom discussion and argumentation.** This danger arises not so much from the Standards themselves as from the guidance about how to implement Standards-based instruction. We fear that the emphasis on close reading,

like other well-intentioned and widely touted educational reforms, has the potential to unleash ‘lethal mutations’ in classroom practice. It could well swing the pendulum to an extreme and unproductive emphasis on autonomous text interpretation, to the exclusion of collaborative talk about text. This is our primary concern, and it is something we have already begun to observe in classrooms and in district-generated guidance documents. Because we are at an early point in the change process, we think it is worth addressing this concern now.

## Background Knowledge is Indispensable for a Level Playing Field

Reading comprehension has been famously characterized by Kintsch (1988) as the process of integrating newly acquired information with pre-existing schemas. Activating relevant background knowledge is a key step in evaluating newly encountered information (does it match or contradict what I already knew?), and more elaborated pre-existing schemas offer greater scope for evaluating and for integrating new information. It is probably impossible to suppress the process of using existing knowledge schemas when reading, so readers with more relevant background knowledge will automatically comprehend a text more readily, and readers inevitably struggle with texts about unfamiliar topics (Americans reading about cricket games comprehend as little as do Brits reading about baseball).

In fact, simply preparing readers by telling them what the topic of a passage is can greatly ease comprehension and learning from a text, vide Bransford and Johnson’s (1972) study of reading texts about doing the laundry with and without informative titles. Limiting teacher questions about a text to those that are purely text-dependent risks putting a stranglehold on the range of questions that can be considered, thus limiting the teacher’s capacity to work skillfully with what students do and don’t know about the textual content.

In 2002, the RAND Reading Study Group (RRSG) defined comprehension as the ‘simultaneous extraction and construction of meaning through interaction with text.’ The RRSG examined the contribution to successful reading comprehension of reader skills, text complexity, reading task, and sociocultural context. Close reading forefronts

extraction over construction, and brings text features into sharp focus, but often at the risk of ignoring differences in reader skills, reducing the variety of tasks, and downplaying sociocultural context. As practiced in heterogeneous classrooms, close reading practices ignore the developmental dimension of reading comprehension – the reader capacities (word recognition, fluency, language skills, world knowledge) that limit the range of texts for which close reading is likely to be useful for any particular learner.

Close reading is an excellent technique for probing sentence structure, nuances of word meaning, subtleties of text organization, and the structure of textual arguments. But it is not a technique for *building* background knowledge, which is the major bottleneck for many struggling readers.

### *The Gettysburg Address as an Example*

Consider the classic example of a text that is recommended for close reading: The Gettysburg Address. Is there any information directly and exclusively extractable from the first sentence of the Gettysburg Address that would enlighten the reader about the history to which Lincoln referred? The layers of meaning that those who are familiar with the Declaration of Independence can extract from the clause ‘conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal’ are completely inaccessible to students who don’t know in what year Lincoln gave the address, what had happened 87 years earlier, or what other document his words invoke. Would we wish students to spend five or six hours (as recommended) on close reading of the Gettysburg Address, perhaps even in the process figuring out locally appropriate meanings for phrases like *our fathers*, *the proposition*, *long endure*, *we are met*, *we can not hallow*, *nobly advanced*, *last full measure of devotion*, and *still* not understand Lincoln’s motivation in giving the speech, the moment in the Civil War when it occurred, the relation of the focus in the speech on nationhood to the nature of the war in which it was delivered, and the centrality to that war of states’ rights and slavery?

Privileging close reading of the text over access to knowledge would only advantage the students whose previous home and school experiences had already provided them with rich conceptual structures for understanding the Civil War. As Hirsch (2013) puts it, listening and knowledge building are the missing strands in reading

instruction, and close reading practices threaten to shove those key teaching activities even further underground.

### ***Understanding Text Versus Gaining Knowledge from It***

We do not think that those who champion close reading are unaware of these issues. Some (e.g. Brown & Kappes: p. 3) make it clear that close reading episodes should be preceded by access to relevant content. They treat this as though it were a simple instructional decision.

Yet experienced teachers might well see a deeper challenge in this simple guideline: “For the purposes of close reading, it is essential to distinguish between the background knowledge that is required to understand the text and the knowledge sought to be gained from reading the text. Teachers should ensure their students have enough context and background knowledge to access the text, either through prior instruction and/or pre-reading activities. That said, **previewing the content of the text undermines the value of a close reading exercise**” (emphasis ours).

Teachers are responsible, then, to predict what required background knowledge each of 20 to 25 different readers lacks, and supply that *without previewing the content of the text in any way*—not a simple task.

### ***Vocabulary and Academic Language***

The same problem holds for another facet of background knowledge—knowledge of vocabulary and of the structures found only in academic language. Some close reading guides warn that only ‘tier three’ or technical, disciplinary words appearing in the passage should be defined for students, who are presumably meant to figure out the meanings of other unknown words on their own. However, there is often disagreement, even among those who study vocabulary acquisition, on which words in a text are ‘tier three’ words, and which are ‘academic’ words.

Other close reading guides say that word meanings can be supplied, but only if “absolutely necessary.” The skillful use of judgment about when to define and discuss a word is part of good teaching; a general prohibition may result in administrators telling teachers *not* to provide information about academic vocabulary. Moreover, a large body of psycholinguistic work makes absolutely clear that texts with too many unfamiliar words are simply not comprehended, and if not comprehended cannot be a source of new word learning (Hu & Nation, 2000; Swanborn & de Glopper, 1999).

As is so often the case with well-intentioned educational reforms, narrow interpretations of the close reading guidelines will likely lead to unproductive practices and pernicious expectations, for example the notion that students can *figure out* the meaning of words in passages laden with unfamiliar vocabulary. This is a particularly dangerous outcome: the widely cited gap in vocabulary between children of educated parents and their less educationally advantaged peers at school entry (Hart & Risley, 1995) is not just a disparity in the words they know, it is a disparity in the concepts they have developed and the breadth and depth of the knowledge to which they have access.

### ***An Attractive Illusion***

The notion that we can level the playing field by limiting a teacher’s questions to those strictly linked to text is an attractive illusion, but an illusion nonetheless. Knowledgeable readers cannot be prevented from bringing to bear their background knowledge of concepts, words, and linguistic structures. Readers lacking in background knowledge cannot add to it only by close reading techniques. If we restrict teacher activities to close reading as prescribed, we are actually sustaining inequities in access to global text comprehension, and thus to the expansion of knowledge. (See Pearson, 2013, for a fuller discussion of how the close reading guidelines violate research-based evidence about reading comprehension.)

## **Close Reading, Tedium and Engagement**

The tedium and struggle of close reading is a threat to its effectiveness as an instructional technique simply because it can cause students to avoid the practice. Note that tedium and struggle are *not* good reasons to avoid close reading—tedium and struggle are unavoidable features of many important aspects of life. This would be fine, were it not for the fact that students in middle and higher grades are already disinclined to read.

Motivation for reading and reading self-efficacy plummet in the middle grades across the board, even among students who are competent readers, but more disastrously for struggling readers (Guthrie, Alao & Rinehart, 1997). Such readers need, at a bare minimum, a reason to engage in

reading. Being assigned a text, however, is not typically a sufficient reason. So our concern is that teachers who are already working hard to engage their struggling readers may be told by their principals or other supervisors that they must now devote most of their time to close reading.

Being given an engaging question (Why were there volunteer gladiators in imperial Rome? Why can you whip cream but not milk? Why do women’s clothes button left to right, but men’s clothes right to left?) might be a good enough reason to peruse texts, even closely, to find the answer, but such questions arise authentically only in the context of rich conceptual structures. Without the backdrop of rich conceptual structures (the social hierarchies of imperial Rome, the physical and chemical structure of fat globules, the history of gendered clothing), such questions become momentary and trivial points in conversation, with little potential for intellectual engagement.

Motivation to continue to engage intellectually comes with deeper understanding. And again, the basic challenge is that highly motivating rich conceptual structures must be built: without the requisite background knowledge they do not spontaneously emerge. Struggling readers do not automatically build rich conceptual structures from reading. But the activities that will help them build these structures would be off limits in a strict close-reading pedagogy: they need lots of opportunities to access relevant background knowledge through videos, below-grade level texts, PowerPoint presentations, lectures, and other sources. Not only do such materials build knowledge, they build interest and motivation to learn more.

If the focus on close reading leads teachers to believe that such activities are banned from the classroom, or more pertinently, if it leads administrators to believe that such activities *should* be banned, the results will almost certainly be bigger gaps in knowledge, and thus in reading comprehension outcomes, between the socioeconomically privileged and their less advantaged peers.

## Privileging Text-Based Evidence Over Other Sources

We do not downplay the value of text-dependent questions and text-based answers in building arguments, but neither are we willing to elevate them to a privileged status. Prior

knowledge, moral judgment, logic, social norms, and other sources also constitute legitimate bases from which to argue.

Close reading is proposed as training for meeting the Common Core Standards of arguing with evidence, but it is simply a mistake to assume that the text being read is the only legitimate source of evidence in constructing an argument. Indeed, one of the goals articulated in the CCSS vision is to promote students’ thinking skills – but if close reading is segregated from other activities, and valorized relative to other kinds of reasoning, we run the risk of the lethal mutation—not what the originators intended, but a result nonetheless. Natural student responses referencing their own experiences in response to a text may be squelched by teachers who believe this kind of evidence is off-limits.

Mathematicians derive evidence from logic. Scientists derive evidence from observations.<sup>1</sup> Young children carefully calibrate the trustworthiness of adults and accept as evidence testimony from those proven reliable (their parents and their teachers, in ideal circumstances; Harris & Koenig, 2006)—and we should be thankful they do, since otherwise they would learn nothing until they could read!

Human beings buttress arguments with social judgments, moral principles, and common sense. When opinion conflicts with fact, fact is taken as the stronger basis for conclusion, but often opinion is completely legitimate and sometimes it is the only source available, for example when arguing about the worthiness of a movie, the style of a writer, or the likely future of a politician. Finally, we want students to learn to *discern the usefulness of different kinds of evidence* in relation to a variety of argumentation goals. A narrow and restrictive focus on text-based information will not support this larger intellectual capacity.

## Narrow Close Reading Undermines Valuable Classroom Discussion

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<sup>1</sup> In the Revised Publishers’ Criteria for the CCSS in ELA and Literacy by Coleman and Pimentel, this point is parenthetically acknowledged on p. 16: “(It bears noting that science includes many non-text sources such as experiments, observations, and discourse around these scientific activities.)” We would argue that such expansion of the list of legitimate sources is appropriate for every content area.

One of the most unfortunate possible consequences of a move toward close reading may be a move away from classroom discussion. Authentic discussion of texts, of questions that motivate the use of texts, and of issues central to math, science, and social studies as well as literature has been recurrently identified as a predictor of good student outcomes (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran, 2003; Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey & Alexander, 2009). Such discussions constitute opportunities for students to draw upon their own knowledge sources, to interrogate and clarify their own reasoning and opinions, and to learn from listening as peers make their thinking public.

Some might argue that this will not be a problem, because of the new focus on discussion and argument in the Common Core. Discussion and oral argumentation are, of course, included as Common Core Standards, but these standards are receiving much less explicit attention in practice guides than are the standards related to text analysis. Why might this be?

The pedagogical challenge of launching and guiding discussions is greater (and less well-defined) than the challenge of close reading practices, narrowly construed. Moreover, assessing discussion is harder than assessing responses to text-based questions, and teachers know that close-reading items will be tested on the new CCSS-linked assessments. Therefore, we fear that discussion will recede as a CCSS goal for many reasons, and that close reading will be one critical factor in crowding it out of the classroom.

In authentic discussions, information from texts is of course an important source of evidence for claims, but nothing would kill a good discussion faster than excluding from consideration other sorts of support students might offer for their claims, ranging from personal knowledge to readings of other texts, or from religious or cultural traditions to moral stances. Far-reaching discussions benefit from the products of close reading, but reading comprehension benefits even more from the contributions of far-reaching discussions.

It does not help that part of the rhetoric in some presentations on close reading contrast it with “discussion” in ways that may feed the belief among administrators and teachers that their goal should be the most restrictive form of close reading—*without* group discussion. For example, in talking about *unproductive* forms of text-related activity,

Coleman highlights “asking all sorts of questions that allow kids to do a lot of talking without reading the text, as a way of generating conversation and pleasure in the classroom.”

In our view, close reading and discussion can form symbiotic relationships with tremendous potential for academic learning. They may support and drive one another into exciting new forms of activity that will strengthen students’ ability to read complex texts. But because both are difficult and demanding to orchestrate, both are subject to lethal simplification in practice: discussion can devolve into mindless pleasurable (or unpleasurable) talking, and close reading can quickly become tightly-focused tedium.

Proponents of both pedagogical practices will object to these characterizations, but the fact is that teaching in heterogeneous classrooms is difficult, and the imposition of new practices must take place with great thought and support for teachers and for students.

## Productive Close Reading

It should be clear by now that we do not mean to argue that close reading is never an appropriate practice. In fact, we think that the experience of struggling with text can be enormously informative to students, and helpful in demonstrating to them a) that they can miss a lot with casual and superficial reading, and b) that they do have resources for getting at meaning.

Wong Fillmore and Fillmore (2012) have demonstrated the value, in particular for ELL and former ELL students, of carefully focusing on and deconstructing a sentence drawn from the text they are reading in any of their content areas. This is a productive example of ‘close reading,’ but it is limited to one sentence and 10-15 minutes per day, and, importantly, done in groups, with teacher support, and considerable peer discussion. (In contrast, close reading is often being implemented using relatively dense texts and asking students to work alone in accessing the meaning.)

Over time, consistent, focused and collaborative use of close reading may lead to a real love of grappling with complex text. And this is presumably the real goal of those who most forcefully advocate the use of close reading.

When done skillfully, close reading is just as challenging as non-text-based discussion. Non-text-based discussion can be difficult for many teachers: it not only requires

knowledge of how to pose and sustain discussion of academically productive questions, but also requires a set of tools to support engagement and to manage equitable participation and respectful interactions.

Close reading, in its most compelling form, is a productive discussion about academic language *in situ*. This is a very special kind of discussion, and it will be challenging for many teachers. For example, if carried out with the kinds of complex texts that are often recommended, such as the Gettysburg Address or Letter from the Birmingham Jail, teachers will be required to manage, moment to moment, differences in readiness to work with the text and its elements.

No matter how engaging the textual puzzle the teacher poses, some students will lack comprehension of most academic syntactic structures and vocabulary while others will be ready to leap into the discussion. Such disparities are always a challenging feature of any classroom discussion, but if teachers feel constrained by their district supervisors to hold back information within their close reading sessions, these discussions will become even more challenging.

In our view, the most productive use of close reading will entail its frequent and consistent use as a tool within the context of broader academically productive classroom discussion. As students learn new content, new conceptual structures, new vocabulary and new ways of thinking, they will learn to return to the text as a primary source of meaning and evidence. But their close reading of text will be embedded within the larger motivational context of deep comprehension of complex and engaging topics. In other words, close reading will be deployed as a tool in achieving purposes other than simply learning to do close reading.

## Conclusion

We fully understand the forces that have led to the focus on close reading in the CCSS, and as noted above we endorse the goal of eliminating unproductive practices. We endorse the goal of including close reading as one of many practices that are useful in the teaching of comprehension and text interpretation. We applaud the use of text-dependent

questions for certain purposes, but only if it is recognized that evidence from sources other than the text under consideration can legitimately be used in discussing a text.

Thus, guidance from a school district such as the following runs the risk of consequential misinterpretation: “In fact, 80 to 90% of the reading standards in each grade require *text-dependent analysis*; accordingly, aligned curriculum materials should have a similar percentage of text-dependent questions.” The administrators in this unnamed district are seeking to guide and benefit their teachers and students. Their intentions are the best, yet unintended consequences may result, to the detriment of all.

We celebrate the move to put text at the center of instruction across the curriculum, to delete talk about the topic that *substitutes* for reading, and to let students struggle productively with text. But we fear that too much emphasis on close reading will lead to unproductive struggles, will be taken as a *prohibition* on discussing and questioning texts, and will create an illusion of a level playing field even as the field is being excavated further from under the feet of struggling readers.

## About the IRA Literacy Research Panel

Under the leadership of Dr. P. David Pearson, Ph.D., of the University of California at Berkeley, IRA created the Literacy Research Panel to respond to critical literacy issues facing policymakers, school administrators, teacher educators, classroom teachers, parents and the general public. The panel intends to engage with policy circles at the national and state level. However, the panel aims to do more than affect policy change; it aims to enhance effective literacy instruction across the country and around the world by introducing constructive initiatives to change policy and practices where it matters: in districts and schools.

For more information visit:

<http://www.reading.org/LRP>

and

<http://www.reading.org/LRPblog>

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