Close Reading and Shared Inquiry as They Relate to the New Common Core

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Abstract

This paper will explore the current requirements and suggestions for implementing “Close Reading” through the new Common Core initiative. It will break down the components of close reading in an attempt to supply the reader with both the knowledge of what close reading is, and how teachers can start takings steps to implement it within their classrooms. Finally, it will compare and contrast the methodology of close reading with the method of “shared inquiry,” through the Jr. Great Books Curriculum. Jr. Great Books is a subsidiary of The Great Books Foundation, which was established by Mortimer Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins in 1947. The method of shared inquiry is often referred to as the Paidea Seminar, a Socratic questioning approach to text interpretation. The idea of close reading is not a new concept, yet it is one that is now a focal point of the current Common Core agenda.

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According to the Common Core English and Language Arts College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards, teachers are being challenged to teach students to be successful “close readers” over all content areas. What exactly does that mean? In the midst of a major curriculum shift, teachers across America are grappling with that question. Per the Common Core State Standard Initiative, there are several components involved in the task of close reading. Beginning with the **Key Ideas and Details**, students should be reading explicit text, and making logical inferences and citing text evidence; extrapolating central themes with supporting details; and analyzing character motivations and events over the course of the text. Next is **Craft and Structure**, where students are to interpret text, including figurative language and word choice. Third, is the **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas,** which challenges students to examine various genres and media formats, examine and evaluate arguments and claims within a text, and analyze two or more texts side-by-side in multiple areas. Finally, **The Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity**, requires students to read and proficiently comprehend informational text (The Aspen Institute, 2012). This is certainly a tall order for any student to master, and yet that is the mission being presented to teachers across the nation to accomplish within their classrooms.

**Close Reading and Challenging Text**

Sheila Brown and Lee Kappas, authors of “Implementing the Common Core State Standards: A Primer on ‘Close Reading of Text,’” (2012) define close reading as an “investigation of a short piece of text, with multiple readings done over multiple instructional lessons” (p. 2). The text that is chosen for investigation and close reading can and should come from various content areas in order to expose students to the practice and effectiveness of reading multiple types of text in a variety of subjects. Furthermore, Brown and Kappas believe that the teacher’s ultimate goal is to prepare students to become independent readers of complex text, as they gradually move away from the dependency on teacher modeling. Likewise, Shanahan, Fisher, and Frey (2013), believe that close reading is “akin to weight or resistance in an exercise program” (p. 58). The philosophy is that by challenging students to tackle text that is difficult and complex, teachers will be able to build skill and stamina.

What precisely is meant by difficult and complex text? There are actually two factors used in measuring text complexity: challenging vocabulary, and lengthy, complex sentences. Students who encounter difficult words immediately profess that the reading is “hard” and they would be right. Students do need to know the meaning of the words, but equally important would be knowing the academic language that surrounds these words, and how to use context clues to decipher a word’s meaning within the sentence. It is critical that students be taught general academic language as well, such as “determines, distributed, resulting, culminates, and classify” that can transcend content areas (Shanahan et al., p. 59).

How a sentence is structured and how the words are related within the sentence are extremely important too. Longer sentences can be daunting to students, but they do serve a purpose. Sometimes, they “are necessary to communicate the complexity of information itself,” causing students to slow down and examine the words and the connections that they can make with them (Shanahan et al, 59). In order to make sense of long and complex sentences, it is also necessary to teach the students text conventions, punctuation, and phrasing. To this end, it is also critical that younger students be taught how words relate to each other, and to be able to identify referents that are further apart in more complex texts.

So how do teachers accomplish building students’ stamina when tackling difficult and complex text? There are actually “three important components of literacy instruction: building skills, establishing purpose, and fostering motivation” (Shanahan, et al, 61). Of course increased practice is necessary when building skills, and close reading supports the idea of multiple readings of the same text to develop fluency and understanding. Knowing how to maneuver within a piece of text, including its punctuation and inflection, requires repeated exposure and modeling. When encountering new vocabulary, students should be given the opportunity to explore those words by “comparing and contrasting words with similar meanings, evaluating or constructing analogies, and building word webs” (Shanahan, et al, 61). In order to build the skills of decoding and interpreting complex text, students need to begin with smaller portions of text and work their way toward longer, more difficult selections.

There is no denying that text difficulty is also directly influenced by a student’s prior knowledge of the material; however, “early training and messaging by some organizations suggested that Close Reading eliminated the privilege of background knowledge and that pre-reading strategies were to be excised from Close Reading lessons” (Brown and Lee, 2012, p. 2). Other experts highly disputed this proposition, raising the concern that this would widen the gap between low performing and proficient readers. “Students’ background knowledge, including developmental, experiential, and cognitive factors, influences their ability to understand the explicit and inferential qualities of a text” (Shanahan et al, 60). If a student is reading a story that is set in a specific time period or addresses a specific event, they should be given some background knowledge of that period in history in order to make sense of the references specific to that event. Furthermore, it is impossible to remove the connections that students make from their own prior knowledge and experience with a subject. Paul and Elder (2004) would support the need for incorporating background knowledge. Teachers should “look for paragraphs that focus on significant ideas or questions. Connect those ideas, when possible, to situations and experiences that are meaningful in your life.” Students should try to actively connect these ideas when possible in order to fully understand and remember the thread of important information.

Teachers should establish a purpose when exposing students to a new piece of text. How does it relate to the students personally? Can they make connections with any other content areas? Exposing students to “hybrid texts” that transcend content areas, and combine narratives with expository information, can be quite effective in helping students to decipher various organizational strategies such as cause and effect, compare and contrast, chronological events, and more. “Finding key paragraphs consists of finding the ideas or questions that are the main focus within the book…all paragraphs within a written piece should connect to every other paragraph in order to see logical connections between ideas” (Paul & Elder, 2004).

Finally, teachers need to find a way to foster motivation and persistence when tackling complex text. Some students will readily give up when confronted with text; it is a teacher’s responsibility to do their best to keep them moving forward. Supporting students through difficult texts, and creating and acknowledging moments of success are critical in continuing the train of motivation. As the level of text is meant to be challenging for the students through close reading, these moments of reinforcing even the smallest of successes is critical. The result is that students become motivated to choose more challenging texts for their own pleasure reading time, and this confidence will also encourage them to choose more complex text in various subject areas as well.

**Shared Inquiry and Junior Great Books**

 The Junior Great Books Curriculum is an inquiry-based program that focuses on giving students the opportunity to “interact with thought-provoking literature as they develop their reading, writing, and oral communication and critical thinking skills” (Great Books Leader’s Guide, p. 7). The Junior Great Books foundation was born from the Great Books Foundation, which was established in the mid 1940’s by two renowned, educational superstars, Mortimer Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins. The curriculum is focused on a method called shared-inquiry, which is also referred to as the Padeia Seminar or Socratic questioning. Like close reading, the stories in the Junior Great Books curriculum are challenging and filled with text that can have multiple interpretations. It is because of this element that students are challenged to examine not just what happens, by why it happens. The stories in the various Junior Great Books Series’ are chosen specifically because their content can be interpreted in multiple ways. As well, the selections have vocabulary and sentence structures that are complex in nature, but create interest during examination and discussion; many also expose the students to various cultures and historical content.

 Because the Junior Great Books curriculum is focused on interpretation, all students “whether or not they are reading at grade level – will be able to contribute, and will grow in their ability to read and enjoy challenging literature” (Junior Great Books Leader’s Guide, p. 7). This is facilitated by multiple readings, which is similar to the approach outlined by the Common Core implementation. The Paideia Seminar, however, has three very distinct differences from the traditional classroom discussion. The first is that the students are the ones who ultimately decide on the important ideas and values that are discussed. That which piques their interest is what drives the discussion. Second, it is through the exchange of ideas that the actual understanding of ideas is created. This shifts the understanding from being given to the student from the teacher, or being found independently by the student, to being revealed to the group as a critical thinking process. Third, because this becomes a construction of synthesized ideas, the teacher does give up his/her direction of the discussion. The teacher acts as a guide who facilitates the discussion based on what the students expose in the reading.

It is also important to clarify that this seminar structure does involve the teacher working with the students in pre-reading activities, which enhance student connections during and after reading, as well as post-seminar activities that culminate the process. After one year-long study of a classroom that consistently facilitated the program, the most significant finding was that “the seminars began to improve only when she (the teacher) focused considerable post-seminar time and energy on assessing what happened during the dialogue and then used the data gleaned from that assessment to deliberately plan the next seminar” (Billlings & Roberts, 2006, p. 2). By this observation, it is safe to say that “practice makes perfect.”

 In Genevieve Arnold’s article, (1988) the seminar experience was brought to light through the Junior Great Books series, in a North Carolina district that committed to two and a half hours a week toward Socratic seminars. They referred to these sessions as the “Wednesday Revolution.” These seminars highlighted the students’ questioning and discussions. They were the active participants with the teachers taking a secondary role. Teachers reported that the students were “gaining deeper understanding of the literature and heightened interest in reading and writing. They are learning to think critically and to respect opinions of their peers” (Arnold, 1988). The teachers also reported that the students across all reading levels were developing higher-level, critical thinking and reasoning skills (Arnold, 1988). In reality, it would appear that the method of close reading and the method of shared-inquiry have very similar agendas and methods of implementation.

**Personal practice** **and reflection.** As a practitioner of Junior Great Books, I can attest to the progress I have seen in my own students. I began teaching the Socratic seminar of shared inquiry several years ago, and from the very first session, I saw a marked improvement in the understanding of text and the ability of students to verbalize their ideas and arguments in a healthy exchange. The method I follow was initially taught to me through a Junior Books training seminar in 2004; however, I have added additional elements to enhance text understanding, discussion, and the written response. My practice involves asking students pre-reading questions that are connected to the major themes or conflicts within the text, but are not based on the text itself. I encourage students to both discuss and write about the questions prior to our reading.

The seconds step is to read the text aloud to the students. This gives all students access to the text, and exposes them to new words in context. It is also helpful to those students whose reading fluency may be at a lower level. The read-aloud is followed by a second, independent reading that is accompanied with a directed question. This question is one that asks students to interpret text, and can be answered from multiple perspectives.

 The first seminar discussion is based on the directed question during the second, independent reading. It is here that the students get their first initiation into the world of Socratic discussion. As the teacher, I must only ask the students to share what they discovered in their reading. The first time I introduce students to this type of discussion, I do call on those who have marked the same text excerpt to share why they agree or disagree with one another. Allowing for a safe environment for students to share their opinions, has yielded greater discussion in other text forums as well.

 Our second seminar discussion is done as a modified “fish bowl” discussion that I call the “hot seat” discussion. In this discussion, half of the students are those who verbally respond to a thought-provoking question based on one of the major themes or conflicts within the story. Like the pre-reading question, these questions are designed to be answered and interpreted in multiple ways. The students on the outside of the circle are also allowed to answer the question, but it is done in writing. These students are also set to the task of observers. They are monitoring the discussion and answering questions about it as it unfolds. These students are also allowed to join the “hot seat” to ask a question or make a comment only, but do not become permanent members of the group. The benefits of this close observation is to engage active listening and support one’s observations with evidence. My practice is to perform two of these Socratic sessions per trimester, allowing those on the inside and outside of the circle to trade places.

 The final piece to my Socratic seminar is the written response. By the time the students have read the selection twice, and responded to it in two types of discussion, they are ready to tackle the writing process. The students are given a choice of questions to respond to. I encourage students to choose that question that they most relate to in terms of both emotional connection and text interpretation. It is here that I have found the most growth in both the organization and critical text reflection. My ultimate goal as the year progresses is to turn the questioning over to the students. I begin to ask them to note critical questions that they have regarding the reading, and submit them on notecards. These I categorize and use as the discussion questions. This both encourages students and gives them confidence as critical thinkers and owners of their own education.

**A final reflection.** According to the Aspen Institute, close reading can be defined as “the methodical investigation of a complex text through answering text dependent questions geared to unpack the text’s meaning. Close reading directs students to examine and analyze the text through a series of activities that focus students on the meaning of individual words and sentences as well as the overall development of events and ideas. It calls on students to extract evidence from the text as well as draw non-trivial inferences that logically follow from what they have read” (Aspen Institute, 2012). It would appear that both Close Reading and the Shared-Inquiry methods meet this definition. However, one of the main differences between the two is the length of the text. Close Reading seems to promote examination of a smaller piece of text, whereas Shared Inquiry can extend over larger excerpts and short stories.

Just as finding the right piece of literature to spark the enthusiasm of a student is of utmost importance, teachers must also be warned not to approach close reading with monotony and “spoilers”. Teachers may underestimate the minds of their students, and subsequently they will supply them with the connections within the text, thus spoiling the moment of discovery. Although it is important for students to reach the ends to the means, the process is what is truly invaluable. When students begin to inquire about confusing text, character motivations, juxtapositions of words, and much more, that is where the real learning occurs. The true art of teaching close reading is to lead the student in the direction, but let them find the treasures themselves. Yes, it may come with frustrations; however, even if they do not find that one theme or connection that you were yearning for, rejoice in the triumph of the theme or connection they were able to reach on their own.

These sentiments are mirrored by teacher, Kelly Gallagher, who expresses, “What the common core asks us to do is to stop doing all of the work of reading for our students, to stop stealing the fun of reading and put it back in their hands.  We want them to explore, uncover the mysteries, inquire, and pick away at the text to figure it out” (Gallagher, 2012). The bottom line is that we are seeking to find ways of teaching children to think and grapple with difficult questions on their own. Quite often, it has been my experience that students will find themes that were not readily seen by me in the beginning. As Nancy Boyles, university professor, consultant, and author says, “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” (Boyles, 12/12-1/13). The learning environment should be one of exchange; one where student and teacher are trading ideas and questions, and ultimately enhancing the learning environment. Nothing can raise a student’s confidence more than seeing his/her teacher learn something from him/her.

 Whether using Close Reading or Shared Inquiry Strategies, teachers must be careful not to create an atmosphere of monotony or boredom. One of my colleagues, who has been formally trained in close reading, discussed the problem of over analyzing a small piece of text. She warned that in order for close reading to be effective, you also need to know when to move on. “You need to find that moment when students are reveling in what they have discovered, and let them bask in it” (Vanessa Nordstrom, Personal Communication, December 1, 2013). She warned that to take it beyond that point can ruin future experiences. Experienced and well trained teachers will know when it is time to stop, Keeping the excitement fresh and the conversation flowing at the lunch table is every teacher’s dream.

Teachers who have experienced various methods of both close reading and shared-inquiry, including myself, see it as a magician’s hat, the more you delve into to its depths, the more wonders you pull out of it. I don’t think there is a teacher in practice today who does not see the incredible value of reading; it broadens a student’s mind in incredible ways. Not only does reading expose students to various fiction and non-fiction topics, but it also serves a great purpose of improving grammar, spelling, vocabulary, speaking, and listening skills. Effective reading lessons potentially hit on more standards over all content areas than any other curriculum focus; the nuances within a great piece of text can spark the inquisitiveness of even the most reluctant reader. The task of a teacher is to find that magical connection to the text that relates to each individual, whether that comes in the form of close reading, or the Socratic method of shared-inquiry. It is no wonder, therefore, that the topic of close reading is high on the Common Core priority list.

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