

Close Reading

A CAUTIONARY INTERPRETATION

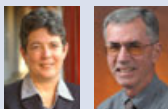
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Authors argue that “close reading,” a key focus of the Common Core State Standards, holds much promise—depending on how it’s used in our teaching and assessment.

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.

—Francis Bacon

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which will be implemented in 46 of the United States by 2014–2015, delineate the academic knowledge and skills that K–12 students are thought to need to successfully enter college and the workplace. They exist for English language arts (ELA); literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects; and mathematics (not addressed in this essay). In response, educational leaders are drawing on private, state, and federal funding to help create new literacy assessments, curriculum guidelines, instructional materials, teacher preparation programs, professional development opportunities, and teacher evaluation systems (Kober & Rentner, 2012; Porter et al., 2012).



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Having experienced several waves of literacy curriculum reform over time, we see considerable potential in these new standards. Yet, we worry that the pendulum might swing too far in a direction that undercuts what is known about adolescents’ literacies, especially their developing abilities to vary reading according to purpose, in keeping with the Francis Bacon quotation that opened this article. We offer here our reading of close reading, a key construct underlying the CCSS reading standards and an idea likely to be considered by governments across the globe that, like the United States, are concerned about youths’ performance on international literacy assessments (Programme for International Student Assessment, 2009).

We begin this essay by describing shifts in literacy instruction promoted by the CCSS. We examine current emphases on close reading and explore varied representations of it. We finish by offering research-based considerations for close reading instruction and conclude with a final word describing the role of teachers’ professional judgment in implementing this research.

Shifts in English Language Arts Instruction

David Coleman (2011), a prominent CCSS author recently named president of the College Board, outlined several fundamental literacy instruction shifts triggered by the CCSS in English language arts.

One shift involves students' reading materials. The CCSS call for a 50/50 balance between informational and literary texts in grades K–5, progressing toward a 70/30 blend in upper grades. The standards also expect texts worthy of close attention to present a staircase of increasing complexity. Exemplars at the 6–8 grade level include *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave, Written by Himself*; and *O Captain, My Captain!* Exemplars at the 9–10 grade level include more challenging works, such as *Fathers and Sons*, *Gettysburg Address*, and *The Odyssey* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA], 2010b).

Another shift involves literacy tasks students are expected to complete. These include answering text-dependent questions focusing on the ideas and information in the text itself and on supporting answers with specific textual evidence. In addition, students are expected to compose evidence-based argumentation and explanation as dominant modes of writing. The new ELA standards also emphasize students' development of sophisticated academic vocabulary used in scholarly reading and writing across disciplines (Coleman, 2011).

Along with these fundamental shifts, several other CCSS-sanctioned practices will likely occur more frequently than usual (Goatley & Overturf, 2011; Perry, 2011; Wessling, 2011). In grade 6 and above, teachers of history/social studies, science, and technical subjects will help students meet the language and literacy challenges of their respective fields.

Students across the grades will compare and synthesize ideas across multiple texts. They will take part in academic discussions, and they will write after reading. They will use research and digital literacies/21st-century skills to conduct and share short- and long-term inquiries (Hess, 2012; NGA, 2010a; Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2011). And they will participate in multiple readings of texts, a practice that is often referred to as close reading.

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also emphasize close reading.*

Common Core State Standards and Close Reading

The CCSS place special emphasis on students reading texts closely. The introduction notes, "Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature" (NGA, 2010a, p. 3). The very first anchor reading standard, which has been termed a "power standard" (Liben, 2012), states that students are to "read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it" (NGA, 2010a, p. 10).

CCSS-centered curriculum guidelines focus on close reading. For instance, the *Revised Publishers' Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades 3–12* (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012) is a forthright guide for publishers and curriculum developers. To date, more than 20 large school districts have agreed to adhere to these criteria when purchasing and creating instructional materials (Samuels, 2012). The document states that "the standards focus on students reading closely to draw evidence and knowledge from the text" (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 1) and that "close reading and gathering knowledge from specific texts should be at the heart of classroom activities and not be consigned to the margins when completing assignments" (p. 9).

A January 2012 CCSS-themed meeting for the chief academic officers of 14 large school districts highlighted the new expectations for close reading (Gewertz, 2012a). It called attention to the need for profound shifts in professional development and instruction as teachers learned to change the way they typically guide students through texts. The Tri-State Collaborative, a group of educational leaders from Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island, was formed to enhance implementation of the CCSS. This collaborative has constructed a rubric for reviewing CCSS-based lessons and units that includes the following "must-have" criterion: "Makes reading text(s) closely a central focus of instruction" (Tri-State Collaborative, 2012).

CCSS-based student assessments also emphasize close reading. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is a consortium of 24 states developing a common set of K–12 assessments in English language arts and math to be implemented in 2014–15. PARCC

produced the Model Content Frameworks to bridge the CCSS with the PARCC assessments. According to this document, “the Model Content Frameworks highlight the importance of focusing on the close, sustained analysis of complex text” (PARCC, 2011, p. 6)

Like PARCC, the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (S-BAC) is another group of 27 states working on CCSS assessments. Its content specifications for English language arts/literacy state, “Anchor Standard 1 in reading...governs Reading Standards 2–9” (Hess, 2012, p. 18). Furthermore, S-BAC has produced claims, broad statements of the learning outcomes it is assessing. Of the four English language arts/literacy claims, the first is “Students can read closely and analytically to comprehend a range of increasingly complex literary and informational texts” (p. 29).

Exploring Close Reading

As veteran literacy educators, we are surprised that close reading has become a principal aspect of reading in the CCSS because it has received little notice in recent professional and research literature devoted to adolescents’ literacies. Close reading has been ignored by current high-profile syntheses of literacy research (e.g., Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011; Edmonds et al., 2009; Kamil et al., 2008), and we have been unable to locate individual empirical studies that overtly investigate its use with youths. So what are adolescent literacy educators to make of this construct?

Close reading gained prominence in the scholarly literature in the 1930s through the 1960s (Davis & Womack, 2002). Classic treatments with popular appeal include “How to Read a Book” (Adler & Van Doren, 1940/1972) and “How Does a Poem Mean” (Ciardi, 1959). The term has come to refer to a family of literacy practices devoted to methodical interpretation of texts (Rabinowitz, 1992). It involves sustained probing analyses, with students reading and rereading to obtain deep and thorough understandings of texts and to grasp the ways texts shape understandings. According to PARCC (2011),

Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining its meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read

and reread deliberately....[It] entails the careful gathering of observations about a text and careful consideration about what those observations taken together add up to. (p. 6)

In literary theory, “To read closely is to investigate the specific strength of a literary work in as many details as possible. It also means understanding how a text works, how it creates its effects on the most minute level” (Mikics, 2007, p. 61). Close reading includes a “productive attentiveness” (Bialostosky, 2006, p. 113) to texts, a “way of attending to the interplay of saying and meaning” (Berthoff, 1999, p. 677). Yet recommendations for conducting the methodical interpretation of texts referred to as close reading vary in important ways.

New Criticism theorists such as Richards (1929) and Brooks (1947) stipulated close reading as a rigorous objective method for extracting the correct meaning of a text. Such a reading seeks to discover a text’s explicit meaning by meticulously analyzing patterns in its language and the ways the patterns combine throughout a text. It focuses on short stories and poems, attending to literary techniques such as irony, metaphor, paradox, and symbolism. The emphasis is on diligent attention to the text and nothing but the text as a self-contained entity; readers interpret meaning within the confines of what the text offers. For instance, linking a text with its author’s life or historical setting is not permitted. This approach was preferred in secondary English language arts classrooms during the 1950s and 1960s (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008).

Subsequent literary theorists have advocated types of close reading that focus on varying purposes and ways of making sense of texts (Davis & Womack, 2002; Lentricchia & DuBois, 2002). Reader-response theorists encourage close reading to transform the meaning of a text according to each reader’s experience (Rosenblatt, 1978) or according to the norms of a particular interpretive community (Fish, 1982). Critical theorists advance close reading as a way to discern how a text’s discourse positions readers according to race, class, gender, and other social markers (Appleman, 2009). Following Derrida (1997), deconstructionists read closely to uncover a text’s different, often contradictory, meanings because, in this view, words refer only to conceptual systems of other words and not to fixed meanings.

Professional literature on college reading/study strategies frequently provides advice on how

to read closely to learn from texts (Kain, 1998; Paul & Elder, 2008; Purdue Online Writing Lab, 2010). The following tips combine much of this how-to advice:

- Read and reread—Read for different purposes (gain an impression of the text’s contents and location of information, analyze the text’s message) and at different rates (fast, medium, slow).
- Annotate—Be an active reader. Take notes about remarkable passage elements, key factual information, and significant ideas in the text. Identify the most important words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs.
- Summarize—Retell the passage according to its structure.
- Self-explain—Figure out how ideas and information relate to one another. Ask and answer questions about the text.
- Determine the significance of what you notice—Figure out why certain ideas and information attract your attention.

Finally, CCSS-related websites such as the following present instructional guidelines as well as sample unit and lesson plans that portray close reading:

- Council of Chief State School Officers: Common Core Implementation Video Series: www.ccsso.org/Resources/Digital_Resources/Common_Core_Implementation_Video_Series.html
- EngageNY: engage.org
- Student Achievement Partners: www.achievethecore.org

The aforementioned websites offer striking representations of close reading. Students read complex, grade-level selections. They dive into the selections with practically no prereading preparation. They respond to teacher-led questions that are specific to the text under consideration, depend entirely on

evidence from the selection for acceptable responses, and result in single sanctioned answers. The questions are framed so that students perform a text-based analysis (e.g., How does the text establish the setting? Which words in the text signal what happened next?), as opposed to a reader-based analysis (e.g., What did you already know that helped you understand this selection? How did you resolve a particular difficulty you had with this selection?).

Thus, advocates of close reading share a view that readers should actively examine texts multiple times to grasp more and more meaning and to realize better and better how texts are constructed to communicate meaning. However, notions differ regarding which features of text construction to consider and how to consider them.

The Promise of Close Reading

We find much promise in having students learn to slow their reading purposefully to meticulously analyze what authors have written. We agree that close reading can be a valuable part of youths’ literacy repertoires, deserving a place among the range of 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, information literacy, flexibility, and collaboration as advocated by the National Research Council (2012). And we prize professional methods texts, such as those by Copeland (2005), Fang and Schleppegrell (2008), Gallagher (2004), Newkirk (2011), and Schoenbach, Greenleaf, and Murphy (2012), that suggest practical research-based ways for youths to know when to engage in such reading and how to do it. With these resources as background, we present the following issues to consider when designing suitable instruction and classroom experiences with close reading.

Text Complexity

A key CCSS issue involves the level of text complexity students ought to engage during close reading (Adams, 2010). English language arts standard 10 for grades 6–12 states that students are to “read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (NGA, 2010a, p. 35). Instead of condemning students who struggle with reading to a lifetime of practice that does not encourage them to read sophisticated offerings, the CCSS suggest that all students encounter challenging texts that are worth reading and rereading closely.

Given this emphasis on text complexity and the concurrent dismissal of traditional notions of readers’

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instructional levels, many students in schools adopting the CCSS are being asked to closely read texts that are more complex than what they've been expected to read before. We worry that many will struggle to do so, whether it's due to the texts' challenging linguistic or conceptual demands or the students' abilities to perform particular close reading tasks. English learners, striving readers, and students with special needs are especially vulnerable—particularly if their intervention reading has focused on decoding and low-level comprehension tasks. All students are likely to become frustrated if they lack sufficient skills and strategies to participate reasonably in close reading discussions and to improve in ways they can apply to future readings (Allington & Gabriel, 2012).

Yet powerful possibilities are available for realizing the promise of having all students closely read complex texts (Calkins, Ehrensorth, & Lehman, 2012). Decisions about matching students with texts can include teachers' judgments about appropriate challenges rather than technical concerns about reader and text assessments. As Moore, Moore, Cunningham, and Cunningham (2011) explained,

Literacy improves in situations with appropriate challenges, ones that stretch students' abilities. Appropriate challenges call for special effort from learners, but they are not defeating. They strengthen students' wills to succeed. They are at the cutting edge of students' abilities—neither too easy nor too demanding. Appropriate challenges are tasks that students are unable to accomplish at first but are able to accomplish with the help of others or with reasonable individual effort. Such levels of challenge allow students the pleasure of exerting themselves and experiencing success. (p. 31)

Soliciting and observing students' responses to the challenge of closely reading particular texts can inform decisions about close reading instruction and experiences.

Additionally, educators can design instruction that provides multiple entry points to reading complex texts closely. For one, they can toggle students' reading among texts with varying complexity. A good way to do this is by enacting theme sets, a practice based on canonical texts embedded within staircases of accessible reading materials and instruction devoted to core thematic vocabulary and schemata (see, for example, Richison, Hernandez, & Carter, 2006). Through backward mapping, texts are gathered that help students bootstrap the language

and knowledge they need to access successively more complex ones.

Other entry points involve reading complex texts aloud to students, a practice favored by many middle school youths (Ivey & Broadus, 2001). Helping students learn to reread texts as a form of second draft, deeper reading has much potential (Gallagher, 2004). Educators can also integrate strategy instruction with knowledge building (Learned, Stockdill, & Moje, 2011). Students deserve strategies that promote their participation in reading closely, especially when they are dealing with complex texts.

Text Range

Motivation and engagement are key aspects of adolescents' literacy learning (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; O'Brien & Dillon, 2008), and relevance has been shown to be a key element in motivation and engagement (Guthrie, McRae, & Klauda, 2007). Youths do well when they read what they find interesting and valuable and when they can connect what they are reading with their personal lives, other texts, and their knowledge of the world.

Appendix B of the CCSS document (NGA, 2010b) lists several text exemplars that suggest suitable complexity, quality, and range at each grade level band. Interestingly, we read many of these texts during our own schooling many years ago. Curriculum writers are likely to include these canonical texts in their instructional designs, noting the selections' historic values and the assurance that they are suitable for CCSS purposes. We worry that this will preclude students' opportunities to engage in close reading of relevant contemporary texts, those that youths find motivating and engaging because the contents align with present-day experiences and that prepare them for the reading demands of today's society.

Providing students access to texts they are enthusiastic about reading remains a productive principle of instruction (Sturtevant et al., 2006). Consequently, an advisable response to offering youths a suitable range of texts to read closely involves taking seriously the words of Appendix B: "The following text samples...expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list" (NGA, 2010b, p. 2). Educators can incorporate their knowledge of what their students find relevant into concerns for appropriate text complexity and quality when selecting texts.

Prereading Instruction

Cognitive psychologists have theorized comprehension as a process of connecting the known with the new, offering many studies that support this theory for learning in general (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) and reading in particular (Anderson, 1984). According to this view, readers develop insights by combining prior knowledge with a text's ideas and information. Readers activate what they already know about a topic and link it with what they are reading to make sense of authors' meanings (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1996).

Additionally, as scholars working within a sociocultural perspective showed how reading was situated in social contexts, conceptions of prior knowledge-text interactions grew quite complex (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). According to the sociocultural view of literacy as social practice, readers comprehend texts in line with their ways of thinking acquired during their academic, familial, community, and popular culture experiences (Perry, 2012). Readers' out-of-school, interest-driven literacy practices have been shown to influence the ways they integrate prior knowledge with new information in texts (Alvermann, 2001; Hull & Schultz, 2002).

Some CCSS authors ignited much controversy when they devalued prereading instruction that tapped prior knowledge, apparently preferring to have readers closely read texts cold, with no front-loaded assistance (Gewertz, 2012b). Given the well-established role of readers' prior knowledge when reading, this devaluation countered much current prereading instruction advice in the professional literature as well as daily practice in classrooms.

To our minds, Newkirk (2012) captured our concern well when he noted that having youths tap their prior knowledge only after reading seems "inhuman, even impossible, and certainly unwise." Shanahan's (2012) response that prereading instruction ought to be brief, strategic, and responsive to students seems well advised. Helping students connect their everyday ways of approaching texts with academic ways is fruitful. Student-directed, independent prereading strategies, such as previewing, anticipating content, noting organizational structures, determining what

already is known and not known, setting purposes, and cross-checking ideas and information, are as important as ever when closely reading complex texts.

Disciplinary Literacies

Current scholarship on disciplinary literacies reminds educators that purposes and approaches to reading differ by subject matter (Moje, 2008; Shanahan, Shanahan, & Mischia, 2011). A historian who studies the U.S. civil rights movement is likely to link her close reading of the essay "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (King, 1963) to a metanarrative that synthesizes varied accounts into a global explanation of events at this place and time (Wineburg, 1991). Similarly, mathematicians and scientists can be expected to engage in close readings that vary by their discipline-specific knowledge, purposes, and ways of thinking (Sfard, 2001; van den Broek, 2010).

Educators do well to attend to disciplinary differences when designing close reading practices. Specialists in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects—as well as other content areas—employ subject-specific ways of reading closely. Among other things, this means being wary of educators who tell how to closely read texts from outside their disciplines, such as English majors who present close readings of historical texts.

Discussion

Interpretive theorists (see, for example, Mead, 1934) have called attention to varied layers of meaning in communicative transactions. For example, close reading of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" may yield one interpretation for the reader described earlier who knows much about the civil rights movement and Dr. King's imprisonment. Someone new to the United States with limited background on its racial history may interpret the letter differently. These interpretations may vary widely from Dr. King's original intent in writing the piece or a teacher's intent in referencing it, yet they can be meaningful readings if students adhere responsibly to the text for justifying interpretive claims.

Combining individual reading with student-led, small-group talk can provide a powerful scaffold for youths to learn to think for themselves as they interpret texts, and it teaches them to note features of others' interpretations (Clark et al., 2003; Nystrand, 2006; Soter et al., 2008). Engaging students with open-ended tasks without simple answers prepares

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them for the critical thinking demands of today's global economy and society.

Close reading tied to student discussion and judgment of text interpretations differs from teacher-directed, whole-class discussion promoting a single, teacher-developed text interpretation, a common practice in schools (Cazden, 2001) that is consistent with some conceptions of close reading and that can cause confusion for some students. Curriculum developers and teachers can, instead, design discussion practices that foster collaborative, open-ended, and responsible versions of close reading that accept and extend students' conceptualizations (Pearson, Moje, & Greenleaf, 2010) in part because the PARCC and S-BAC assessments have not yet been introduced, an event that will likely yield a new generation of test-driven notions of text interpretation and test preparation.

Strategy Instruction

Generations of linguists, sociolinguists, social psychologists, and sociologists have described language instruction as needing both overt, explicit instruction and authentic, situated practice in varying combinations that depend on students, tasks, and texts (Delpit, 1988; New London Group, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1981); optimum combinations remain fertile ground for researchers (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). Convincing research of secondary-school literacy programs confirms this need (Langer, 2002). The promise here is that the CCSS provide educators with the opportunity to invite students to address the new close reading standards with multiple and varied approaches. Teaching students how to analyze text-based questions and provide the kind of evidence needed to answer them seems crucial.

We are especially hopeful about the emphasis close reading places on the language of texts. Students will be focusing on specific words authors use to achieve their purposes, how authors organize their presentations, and why some contents are included and not others. Examining the language of texts across various text types in genre study is especially promising (Kamil, 2011), and academic literacy engagement and competence tend to improve when students can employ independent strategies to conduct such examinations (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Klauda, 2012). Moreover, applying principles of close reading to both published and student-produced texts has much potential. Students can learn to closely

read both types of texts in the same ways, building on relationships between writing and reading (Graham & Hebert, 2011).

A Closing Word

As the following quotations show, the CCSS present clear guidance relative to learners' outcomes, although the ways educators are to help learners achieve the standards are open to professional judgment:

- Teachers are free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards (NGA, 2010a, p. 4).
- The Standards set grade-specific standards but do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations (NGA, 2010a, p. 6)
- The Standards appropriately defer decisions about what and how to teach to states, districts, and schools (NGA, 2010c).

This essay is meant to encourage and inform educators' exercise of professional judgment in planning instruction to help students engage in purposeful close reading. As the Bacon quotation suggests, such reading is one element of literacy that deserves instructional attention. We are encouraged as we see colleagues engaging in close readings of this construct, experimenting with instructional methods to help students understand varied meanings and benefits of close reading. Such actions give us hope that the term *close reading* will not become an ironic reference to a practice that in fact distances youths from the literacies needed to fulfill their lives.

Note

Thanks to Literacy Research Association colleagues on our Association listserv for confirming this assertion and for keen discussion of the term's origins.

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