



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

by

Catherine Snow

Graduate School of Education, Harvard University

Catherine O'Connor

School of Education, Boston University

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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



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.



One of the most unfortunate





References

