

Timothy Shannahan

Close Reading or Guided Reading

Recently, I've been fielding questions about guided reading (à la Fountas and Pinnell) and the common core; mainly about the differences in how they place students in texts. Before going there, let me point out that there is a lot of common ground between guided reading and common core, including high quality text, the connections between reading and writing, the emphasis on high level questions and discussion, the idea that students learn from reading, and so on. Nary a hint of conflict between the two approaches on any of those issues.

Not so with student-book placements; on that there is a substantial divide. Guided reading says go easy, and common core says challenge them. Easy, according to F&P, means placing kids in books that they can read with better than 90% accuracy and with high reading comprehension (and they make no distinction between beginners and more adept readers in this regard). For common core, making it challenging means placing students, second grade up, in books that would be frustration range according to F&P; books that students would read with markedly lower fluency and comprehension on a first read.

How can these schemes be so different?

Fountas and Pinnell advocate for a system of text placement that has been widely and long accepted in the field of reading (I've previously written about the sources of those ideas). F&P add to that a philosophical position that maintains students learn best from figuring things out themselves from reading, rather than from the explicit instruction a teacher might provide. In their plan, much of the teacher's work is devoted to accomplishing an appropriate placement of students in texts, and they strive to minimize the distance between what a text demands and what students can now do current so that students can scale these small challenges with minimum teacher input.

Any student/text differences can be reduced even more, in the F&P scheme, by providing background information about the text through picture walks and the like. Over time, by reading texts that gradually get harder, students learn to read by reading books that they understand and enjoy. F&P are candid that book placement does not always work out and that, under such circumstances, teachers may have to provide mini-lessons or other supports. Nevertheless, they stress the importance of minimizing the need for such supports. As good a job as they do in demonstrating how to get students to the correctly leveled texts, they provide surprisingly little info about how and when to advance students to higher levels; students may languish at a level since there is no well-worked out plan for ensuring progress.

By contrast, the common core intentionally would have teachers place students in texts that are more challenging. The CCSS levels, if accomplished, should allow students to read well enough by high school graduation to be college and career ready. Traditional placement schemes lead to students completing high school approximately 2-3 reading levels below what is actually needed—that's why so many students require remediation in college.

The more challenging text placements presume that teachers will provide extensive scaffolding, explanation, support, and teaching to enable success. Since the common core is not, by and large, invested in any particular instructional methods (close reading push is a notable exception), it can set text levels based on learning goals and the very real need to get students to particular levels before they graduate, rather than trimming the text levels to fit pedagogical philosophy.

I think most common core advocates would say, “The issue is not how much teaching teachers have to do, but how much students can learn in the time we are working with them. If teaching students with more challenging texts leads to greater amounts of learning, then we accept the burden of having to teach more.” Fountas and Pinnell, too, want kids to learn, but their philosophy is that this learning works best when kids negotiate the reading system on their own, and that justifies the idea of not demanding too much in terms of text difficulty. For F&P how you learn is as important as what you learn.

F&P’s version of guided reading has been around for almost 20 years, but there are other versions of the idea that go back much further. There must be a lot more research evidence supporting their approach than the one now being espoused by the common core. Unfortunately, that is not the case. We do not have studies showing the effectiveness of guided reading over other approaches.

Many teachers might respond: “Studies or no studies, I know guided reading works because I have taught with it and my students make good progress.”

There is absolutely no question that students can learn with guided reading (that they have learned with it, and that they will continue to learn with it). Guided reading is widely used in U.S. schools. But there is an issue of opportunity costs here; would students learn more if they were placed in more challenging texts? We, of course, can never gauge the success of the alternatives that were not tried.

Studies, quoted in previous blogs, show that students can make real learning progress while matched to a variety of text levels, though they tend to do best when matched with more challenging texts than guided reading advocates recommend. Thus, placing students in easy text CAN lead to learning, but placing students in more challenging texts and then making sure they can successfully negotiate them (through rereading, analysis of information, etc.) may lead to even greater success.

At the end of the day, the disagreement is philosophical rather than empirical—it is about the desirability of teaching. If you think it is better for kids to figure things out with minimal scaffolding, then it makes sense to control the degree of challenge; too much difficulty would only lead to failure and frustration. However, if, on the other hand, you think it is okay to provide students with as much support as they might need to engage successfully in a particular task, then limiting difficulty too much would reduce the opportunity to learn.

In general, I think the common core approach is the right one – it puts greater emphasis on teaching and long range learning goals than on text placement. And, yet, we are depending on educators—including me – who were prepared more to place students in books than to teach them. The success of the common core depends not just on the use of more challenging texts (that’s the easy part), but on whether teachers will have the patience and foresight to provide sufficient and appropriate scaffolding that will help the students to figure out the meaning of a challenging text without being told what it says.

