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What is Close Reading 2

Here are some myths about close reading and my responses.

1. Close reading is a teaching technique.

We have many of teaching techniques for guiding kids through reading. When I was becoming a teacher, the big shift among some was from the Directed Reading Activity (DRA) to the Directed Thinking Activity (DRTA). The DRA was one version of the typical basal reader lesson: the teacher would preteach vocabulary, review background information, give kids a purpose for reading, and then the text would be read in segments interspersed with teacher questions and student answers.

The DR-TA was aimed at improving upon this: in this scheme the text was previewed and students made predictions as to what would happen; then the text would be read in segments interspersed with discussions of how those predictions came out along with new predictions (this was commonly referred to at the time as "reading like a detective"—ironically, a term being used now to characterize close reading which decidedly does not encourage prediction (I think the difference probably is that the creator of the DR-TA was a big Sherlock Holmes fan, and one suspects David Coleman likely prefers the Sam Spade-style detective who bumbles along a bit more, with fewer declared hypotheses) . Vocabulary was dealt with as it came up; the kids got the chance to deal with it themselves first.

Of course, there is also KWL and Reciprocal Teaching Lessons, and on and on. All of these kinds of schemes have been put forth as a good way to teach students to comprehend what they read, many of them have a certain amount of research behind them showing that the advantage student learning in some way or other.

Close reading was not put forth as a teaching technique. It was always espoused –when it was discussed overtly at all—as a sophisticated and powerful way of reading. It is in that vein that close reading is being espoused now within Common Core. Close reading is an outcome or a goal. Close reading is NOT a teaching technique that we all now must adopt. It is an outcome to be strived for. It certainly does make sense to model such behaviors for students so they can understand what to emulate, and it makes sense for teachers to involve students in close readings of texts so that they can develop these kinds of interpretive muscles. Teachers are seeking the technique for teaching close reading. They would be better off signing up for a Great Books discussion group in their community, or enrolling in a really good literary criticism class focused on poetry or some terrific novel. Think of these as a kind of reading version of the Writer's Workshop approach to professional development for teachers (Writer's Workshop has traditionally taught teachers to write—trusting that they would be able to share their insights with students). Being able to do close reading isn't everything, but it is a great starting place; certainly better than signing up for a workshop in "How to Teach the Close Reading Lesson."

2. Close reading should not devolve into a technique.

There are many versions of close reading, some that I gravitate towards (like Mortimer Adler's) and

some that I reject (Wimsatt & Beardsley). However, what should determine how we read a text closely should have a lot to do with the text itself. In Adler's close reading, a text is read 3-4 times. I share that idea often with teachers, and then shudder as I watch them trying to do it just like that. Not all texts deserve 3-4 readings, and some can't possibly be understood or appreciated with only that many readings. Adler and Van Doren lay out each of these readings as if it is a totally separate trip through the text (and I parrot that in my demonstrations), and yet expert readers often telescope those reads… for example, Peter Rabinowitz once told me that the challenge to teaching freshman literature was getting students to do the "second reading on their first encounter with the text." What I took that to mean was that it was too laborious and slow a process for students to have to wait until they understood the story before they could start attending to how the author's craft choices were supporting or extending those messages. To get immature readers to pay attention to the craft and structure issues while they were first making sense of the plot would be an accomplishment. I agree, and, yet, it sure blows the hell out of the neat discrete steps laid out by Adler and Van Doren. As well it should.

As soon as someone tells me that close reading requires three readings and rereadings, or that you must do it with a pencil in hand, or that it requires that 80% of the questions accomplish some particular goal, etc., my tendency is to do it without out those. The problem for teachers is that they have to get a real sense of what close reading is and what steps in can include, and what they learn about that has to be articulated in a clear enough way that they could guide students to experience such work… but this sense has to be flexible. Close reading is not one thing; there are many versions of it. Understand the steps. Get a structure for close reading in mind. But then let the text dictate the terms of engagement. Some texts could be read closely in a couple of reads. Some might require attention to author's word choices, while others might raise more structural issues.

The basic notions of close reading that everyone seems to agree on are: (1) close readings involve interpretations of what a text conveyed both in terms of the message coded into the text by the author and the choices that the author made in how to convey that message—in other words the key ideas and details and the craft and structure are treated as a unity; (2) close readings require a lot of attention to the text itself; (3) close reading usually will require at least partial re-readings of the text. How these play out should not be easily described, because they should vary a bit each time depending on the demands and qualities of the text to be read closely.

3. Close reading does not focus on "right there" questions.

Close reading, at least the literary version, engages the reader in a careful and thorough analysis of a text, with minimal dependence on external information. Historically, those who have espoused close reading (e.g., I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, William Empson, John Crowe Ransom, Alan Tate, Mortimer Adler) have discouraged the use of author's biography, historical context, or secondary sources (including external information from other readers) to guide text interpretation. The only evidence or information the reader is to rely on for a close read is the information that the author has included in the text. Reading closely or deeply means reading both for the information expressed directly in the text, but it also includes making sense of how the construction of the text itself reinforces or supports this message.

Towards that end, common core supporters have been emphasizing the idea that teachers should ask "text dependent questions." This term is from reading assessment, and it refers to the idea that

test questions—usually multiple-choice questions—should not be answerable without the text being available. (They literally have two groups completing test items: one group who gets the passages and the questions, and one that only gets the questions. If the latter group can answer these questions at better than chance levels, then a question is text independent and it is usually replaced since it would not be a valid indicator of student reading ability).

The idea that the questions have to be about the text and only answerable with information drawn from the text has led many teachers to believe that what they are supposed to ask are "right there" questions; that is questions that can be answered only with information stated explicitly in the text by the author. This is not the case. Students might be asked to examine how the meaning of the word "faction" changes with use across Federalist Paper #10, as is noted in the common core standards document itself, or they might be asked to compare the two worlds that Robert Frost creates in his poem, "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening." These are not literal recall items, nor do they call for mere logical inferences. These require full-blown interpretations of text (and though contradicting some of the less temperate common core claims),interpretations that require both the use of readers' prior knowledge and an intensive focus on evidence in the texts.

Teachers would be wise to set aside their former question schemes (e.g., Bloom's taxonomy, QAR, etc.). There are two issues at the heart of close reading: (1) Does the question require the use of information drawn from the text itself?—both in terms of what it says and how it says it; and (2) Does the question encourage students to think about important information? It is absolutely legitimate to ask questions about information that a text states explicitly as long as that information is important to building an interpretation (then it is not low level, even though it may only be an issue of memory). If we are trying to come to terms with "Alice in Wonderland" it is perfectly wise to ascertain what happens to Alice when her sister is reading to her. It might seem too "right there" that she has fallen down the rabbit hole, but until that is understood, it isn't going to make a lot of sense to probe into the metaphorical nature of that fall. The various settings in that story matter a lot too, in terms of symbolism and themes, so using questions to ensure that students are attending to these aspects of this story would be valuable (while in many other stories, the settings don't have that degree of importance and would not be worth spending the time on). High level-low level is out; important or unimportant to a deep interpretation of the text is in.

The idea here isn't that Bloom's taxonomy can't be used, but that when we use it, we have a tendency to ask high level questions that don't require much attention to the text. By all means, ask students to evaluate, but the terms of such evaluation needs to drive students deeply into a use of text evidence. Similarly, "right there" questions are not the only ones that are text dependent, nor are "right there" questions to be avoided. We should ask about important ideas and details in a text when guiding students to build an interpretation, and whether the information is right there or not is immaterial to the issue at hand. [CCSS is the first set of standards, objectives, scope and sequences, etc. that I have seen in 40 years that does not make a big distinction between literal recall and inferences. CCSS groups these together as things that students need to be able to do to accomplish particular purposes. The strands stress the accomplishment of the purpose not the nature of the process; a refreshing shift.]

4. There is not one version of close reading.

Earlier I referred to some of the literary arguments about close reading. For example, while close

reading enthusiasts have been unified in their rejection of author's biography as a valid or useful jumping off point for text interpretation, there are serious differences over issues like whether it is okay for readers to consider author's intentions during interpretation. I don't want to minimize the importance of these arguments, but when I refer to different versions of close reading here, I'm not talking about such minor squabbles.

One of the things that Cyndie Shanahan and I learned when we were studying the reading of chemists, mathematicians, and historians, was that all of these fields embraced something that they themselves explicitly referred to as "close reading." In fact, it is one of the reasons why I am not a big fan of the term "close reading." Literary critics have written the most about how they read (a pastime few mathematicians or scientists engage in), and so they believe that their version of close reading is it. They seem to accept it is a term of art, but if it is, it is a term of art common to several fields, and one with varying meanings across disciplines.

For example, our mathematicians, who used the term close reading, used it to refer to the painstaking word-by-word analysis that they engage in, weighing every "a" and "the" for its significance. However, this is not the kind of analysis that literary critics recommend. For the mathematicians, because of the concentrated nature of their texts and the abstractness of the content, this kind of reading is required from the beginning to determine what the author is saying. It is not that mathematicians are not interested in the elegance of a theorem or axiom, but that the close reading process has a different purpose and plays out in a different way than the one you will find David Coleman demonstrating on the Internet.

Similarly, the wonderful examples of David's close reads of the Gettysburg Address and King's Letter from Birmingham Jail are valuable for revealing the kind of rhetorical analysis that English majors bring to the table. I don't see how anyone can watch those videos and not appreciate the value of such interpretation. However, my historian friends think they miss the point of history reading. For whatever value they add, they elbow aside the historian's notions of close reading.

Historians do not buy into the kind of decontextualized analysis of language evident in those examples. It may be worthwhile to track the meaning of the word "dedicate" across Lincoln's remarkable speech, but the exercise is only meaningful to them if it is contextualized in its time. What did "dedicate" mean to Lincoln in 1864, and how was it likely to be interpreted by his fellow citizens? The interpretation of the Gettysburg speech in modern literary or rhetorical terms (as exemplified in those on-line lessons) is instructive; but I think most historians would gravitate to the exegesis of the address carried out by Garry Wills—since it considers the author's goals, the historical context that led him to produce that speech, and corroborated it with other historical documents. While the student of literature reads closely, within a text, to understand the rhetoric of the document and its aesthetic values, the student of history is reading closely to try to understand the implications of the document and what led to its creation--and such reading is necessarily multi-textual in nature.

It is not that one close reading is better than the other, but it is important for schools to teach students to read like literary critics, historians, mathematicians, and scientists and to do so when the time is right – rather than teaching them to be close readers and to impose this single version of close reading on everything that they read, no matter how inappropriate.