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What is Close Reading?

The common core standards are encouraging teachers to engage students in close reading. Much of the focus of discussions of close reading have emphasized what teachers should not do (in terms of pre-reading, or types of questions). I am being asked with increasing frequency what close reading is.

Close reading requires a substantial emphasis on readers figuring out a high quality text. This "figuring out" is accomplished primarily by reading and discussing the text (as opposed to being told about the text by a teacher or being informed about it through some textbook commentary). Because challenging texts do not give up their meanings easily, it is essential that readers re-read such texts (not all texts are worth close reading). A first reading is about figuring out what a text says. It is purely an issue of reading comprehension. Thus, if someone is reading a story, he/she should be able to retell the plot; if someone is reading a science chapter, he/she should be able to answer questions about the key ideas and details of the text.

However, close reading requires that one go further than this. A second reading would, thus, focus on figuring out how this text worked. How did the author organize it? What literary devices were used and how effective were they? What was the quality of the evidence? If data were presented, how was that done? Why did the author choose this word or that word? Was the meaning of a key term consistent or did it change across the text? This second reading might be a total re-reading or a partial and targeted re-reading of key portions, but it would not be aimed at just determining what the text said (that would have already been accomplished by this point).

Finally, with the information gleaned from the first two readings, a reader is ready to carry out a third reading—going even deeper. What does this text mean? What was the author's point? What does it have to say to me about my life or my world? How do I evaluate the quality of this work—aesthetically, substantively? How does this text connect to other texts I know? By waiting until we have a deep understanding of a text – of what it says and how it works—we are then in the right position intellectually and ethically to critically evaluate (valuing) a text and for connecting its ideas and approach with other texts.

Thus, close reading is an intensive analysis of a text in order to come to terms with what it says, how it says it, and what it means. In one sense I agree with those who say that close reading is about more than comprehension or about something different than comprehension, since it takes one beyond just figuring out an author's stated and implied message. On the other hand, many definitions of reading comprehension include more than just determining a stated and implied message; such definitions include the full range of Bloom's taxonomy in one's thinking about and use of a text. If one subscribes to such definitions of comprehension, then close reading is just a description of a process one uses to arrive at such comprehension.

I think with this brief description of the essentials of close reading (e.g., intense emphasis on text, figuring out the text by thinking about the words and ideas in the text, minimization of external explanations, multiple and dynamic rereading, multiple purposes that focus on what a text says, how

it says it, and what it means or what its value is), teachers can start to think clearly about a number of issues in close reading.

Should I give the students a preview of a text?

No, you probably should not, but it is not unreasonable to have students do their own look over, allowing them to get the lay of the land.

Is it okay to set a purpose for student reading?

Yes, it is very reasonable to give students a purpose for reading (read to find out the differences between lions and tigers, or read to find out how this character deals with hard choices). But these purposes should not reveal a lot of information about the text that the students can find out by reading the text. Of course, if you are reading a text multiple times, each time for a different purpose, you might provide a lot more information on later readings. (This text used a lot of metaphorical language to describe how the characters felt, let's re-read those sections and discuss what the author was accomplishing by doing it that way.)

Does close reading require that every text be re-read?

Yes, it really does, but that doesn't mean that every text should be given a close reading. Some texts should still be read only once; that is all they would be worth.

What if I am unsure whether to discuss prior knowledge before reading a text?

If you think there is key information that students need to know before they read the text (something necessary for making sense of the text that isn't stated in the text), by all means tell it. If there is no pre-information necessary, then don't make such a presentation or discussion. If you are uncertain, then let the kids have a chance to make sense of it. If it goes well, fine. If not, then add the information before the second reading. (I was just looking at an article on forest fires. "It is only partly true that 'only you' can prevent forest fires." That is a cute beginning, but I'm not sure all of the second-graders will recognize that it is referring to a Smokey the Bear line from a once-common public service announcement. I might want to clarify the source of that before students dug in. But if I didn't do that, I would definitely ask a question about this sentence, and would tell that info during the discussion. Sometimes I will anticipate and tell, but whether I do or not, I can always clarify it on discussion.