



# THE Reader

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## Misconceptions about Close Reading and the Common Core

by Timothy Shanahan

**M**y correspondent was upset. She was writing because her teaching evaluation had not gone well. She was teaching what was supposed to be a “close reading” lesson and her evaluator thought she had done a terrible job.

The reason she was writing me was because she had modeled her lesson on my close reading presentation. The supervisor was concerned that she asked too many “right there” questions and not enough higher order ones. The observer was offended that this teacher had not focused heavily enough on issues of craft and structure and critical evaluation. Clearly, somebody was wrong.

Of course, there are always minor misinterpretations that occur from such presentations and execution can be a real problem sometimes—that is, someone may believe they are executing what you said, but they may not be doing so very effectively.

However, I don’t think that was the case this time. The teacher’s description convinced me that the supervisor had a weak understanding of close reading, but was going to cling to this thread of “knowledge” for all it was worth.

I’ve read quite a bit about New

Criticism and close reading over the years—both pro and con. I.A. Richards. Check. William Empson. Check. Robert Penn Warren. Check. Wimsatt & Beardsley. Check. I studied Adler and Van Doren like a Gospel when I was still young enough to get really passionate about such matters. I learned to read a book and a page. I hied to publishers that minimized the “apparatus” (kudos to Library of America) and to publications that avoided getting between the writer and the reader (Go, New Yorker!). I even found ways to split the differences between the E.D. Hirsch and Cleanth Brooks.

In none of my studies of the topic did I learn that plot didn’t matter in a story or that we shouldn’t ask kids about key ideas and details of a text if the author was explicit about those. Nor did I learn that it was essential that close readings include a hodgepodge of thinking. Reading, in that view, is apparently just a disorderly melange of key ideas and details, craft and structure, and critical response.

I have spoken with brilliant literary critics (Peter Rabinowitz for one) who explained to me that the hardest thing about teaching freshmen college English students to engage in close reading is to get

to the craft and structure earlier—but that had more to do with their impatience and lack of self confidence as readers, rather than any vision of reading and the way it ought to be.

### Preteaching Forbidden?

Recently I heard from a publishing company friend who was presenting a program to teachers. One of them was adamant that the program was doing it “wrong”, because in close reading, you are “not allowed” to preteach vocabulary. She evidently was certain that such preteaching had been forbidden by the Common Core State Standards.

In my discussions of this matter with David Coleman and other members of his team, we all agreed (very quickly) that issues like the introduction of vocabulary or the pre-teaching of word recognition skills in anticipation of a text were *separate matters entirely* from other issues of prereading (such as previewing text, predicting what

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will happen in that text, background knowledge preparation, purpose setting, etc.).

I think we sometimes overdo the preteaching of vocabulary and I'm pretty certain that we don't always pick the right words for such assistance, but the research on this matter is clear and overwhelming: preteaching vocabulary improves reading comprehension and in-

It can be very appropriate to preteach vocabulary for a close reading, as long as the author doesn't provide the definitions himself/herself within the text, or if the interpretation doesn't turn on the nuances of meaning of the pretaught words. The point is to enable students to read the text successfully, but without doing the interpretive work for them.

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**"...issues like the pre-teaching of word recognition skills are separate matters entirely from other issues of prereading..."**

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creases the chances that students will be able to make sense of complex texts. Common Core is absolutely silent on the issue despite this teacher's absolute certainty that it has forbidden such lessons. The problem in both of these cases (and many more that seem to arise each day) is our all-too-human need to lord it over our fellowman (and woman). People who a year ago hadn't even heard of close reading are now "experts" on the matter. I wouldn't mind so much if they had strong educational backgrounds that had engaged them in close readings of history, literature, science, or math—but most never had such opportunities. I wouldn't mind if they were reading the kinds of sources I noted earlier and had not only a depth of understanding what they were talking about, but an awareness of how to be flexible in these principles and precepts without making a wreck of the whole enterprise.

It is funny. In an approach to reading that necessarily must be flexible—because of the centrality of the text to such interpretation—we are spawning a bunch of supervisory twits who are insisting on inflexibility at every turn. Instead of paying close attention to the text and allowing it to determine the direction of the interpretative exploration, these buggers want everyone to do it their way.

It can be very appropriate to ask "right there" questions about a text, as long as the explicit ideas that are queried are key points that are essential to building a sophisticated interpretation. If there are three key tenets to a scientific theory, I want to make sure the kids got them, even if the author stated them explicitly.

It can be valuable to have an organized discussion of such matters that ensures that students not only got the major points, but that they are understanding how they fit together (developing coherent memories of such points is valuable). The same goes for asking about key plot turns and character motivations. The issue with such questions isn't whether they require memory or inferencing, but whether they are essential points in the universe of thought created by the author.

It can be very appropriate to read a text multiple times, each time going deeper into the interpretation. Adler and Van Doren suggest the necessity of three or four readings of the "great books," with each reading solving part of the interpretive problem. Thus, it is fine to read the text once just to come to terms with what it has to say, then to read it again to delve deeply into the author's choices of craft and structure and how these serve to extend and reinforce the

meanings identified in the first reading.

Principals, supervisors, and teacher evaluators: If you have just learned about close reading, if you have seen a presentation on it at a conference or a school workshop, if you have read a few chapters about it in Doug Fisher's book or glanced at my blog, or watched a YouTube video, or read the first version of the Publisher's Criteria, let's assume that you really don't understand it very well yet! Show some humility when it comes to lording your vast knowledge over your colleagues and subordinates.

Do you understand how close reading differs in history and literature and science? Do you understand the implications of the idea that close reading isn't a teaching technique but a learning goal? Do you grasp the differences between reading and reading deeply? Can you discern the difference between high level or higher order questions (a la Bloom) and essential or important questions within the universe of the text? Have you taken part in a Great Books discus-

sion group? If not, be humble.

There are many ways to do close reading and there are big philosophical differences in what may seem to be minor points (e.g., is it okay to explore the implications of a theme in children's own lives? is it okay to draw interpretive information from the author's biography or other works that he or she has written? can the reader use what he or she knows about the social world to draw connections among the ideas in a text or to determine a character's or historical figure's motivations?). Do you understand what the implications are of these various views?

For the supervisor who said that it is inappropriate to ask "right there" questions in close reading, I would ask "Why?"

What is it about close reading that is violated by determining that there is bad blood between Hector and Achilles or that Ahab is obsessed with Moby Dick? Yes, those are clearly stated or demonstrated in the text, but why would it be wrong to ask such questions? Why would it be bad to question

students on what God forms the universe from in the first 10 lines of Genesis (as David Coleman asked an audience at IRA this week)? Again, if these questions are offensive to your view of close reading, there must be a reason why they are offensive. Prejudice against "right there" questions seems to be tied to various theories of reading instruction, but it has no discernible connection to close reading as far as I can tell.

Why wouldn't you preteach the vocabulary essential to making sense of a text—especially if your purpose is to teach reading to a group of children? Perhaps close reading, in this regard, may play out differently in a Yale seminar room than in Mrs. Jones' third grade classroom at P.S. 57.

Close reading, complex text, writing from sources, and the common core are all quite new. Let's not understand them too quickly. This is a time for humility. ■

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You can sign up for Dr. Shanahan's blog (and archives) at: <http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/>

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Each issue, we feature emerging research of special interest to Arkansas reading teachers. Abstracts of Action Research Studies (conducted by students at Arkansas Universities) are followed by links to full text versions of the same.

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## Tableau and Vocabulary Knowledge

by Emily Terrell

An action research project was designed to determine the effects of explicit instruction incorporating Tableau on vocabulary knowledge in a second-grade classroom. The intent was to measure how directly teaching the meaning of words in a storybook using physical movements to act out the words impacts the number and depth of words students understand.

Twenty-two students' receptive vocabulary was measured before and after the study using the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, 4th Edition*. Students' depth of knowledge of the words specifically taught in this study was measured before and after the study using a research-developed depth of word knowledge assessment. During the course of the intervention, students participated in explicit vocabulary instruction incorporating Tableaux, of words found in storybooks. Tableaux required students to create, either individually or in small groups, a still image with their bodies that represented the meaning of the word. This occurred 45 minutes a day, four days a week, for eight weeks. The results of this study revealed a significant increase in the means of both the receptive vocabu-

lary knowledge and depth of knowledge of the specific words taught in this study. Results further revealed that depth of vocabulary knowledge scores increased notably more than receptive vocabulary knowledge. Analysis of scores of the subpopulations in the study suggest that explicit instruction using Tableaux was equally effective for all students regardless of age, gender, or first language spoken. Finally, anecdotes recorded throughout the study indicate that students transferred the vocabulary knowledge into their speaking, reading and writing. The anecdotes also showed an increase in students' willingness to work cooperatively. Results of the present study support research suggesting that robust vocabulary instruction is an effective method for teaching word meanings. ■



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**The Impact of Literature  
Circles on 7th Grade Students'  
Comprehension and  
Higher Order Thinking**

by Emily Carlton

This research looks at the impact of literature circles on 7th grade students' comprehension and higher order thinking. The researcher collected data from two experiments and a survey. The baseline data was collected from DRA results and test results from a novel study. The data for experiment 1 was taken using reading response journals, active reading notes, discussion observations, antidotal notes, and a final project. These results were compared to the baseline data. Experiment 2 compared a literature circle with independent reading and a read aloud. The data from experiment 2 was taken using an end of book test and results were compared with one another.

The analysis of the research indicates that literature circles may increase reading comprehension and higher order thinking, but the experimental data was inconclusive. Whether this was due to lack of preparation, direction, or student factors is uncertain. More experiments will need to be conducted and more data will need to be collected. This researcher can theorize that with practice and more direction, literature circles will be very effective in comprehension and higher order thinking. Literature circles can be a very effective instructional tool. The results of the survey showed that students like the social aspect of the literature groups. Creating a social reading environment can help improve literacy. The key is to find ways to make literature circles work through training, modeling, practicing, and implementation. ■

Full text versions of these action research studies can be found at: [http://arareading.org/the\\_reader\\_81.html](http://arareading.org/the_reader_81.html)

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