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Providing Close Reading Scaffolds Effectively

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Close reading is hot; there's no doubt about it.

This time, it's not only teachers of adolescents and college students but also elementary educators who are paying attention to this instructional routine. Clearly more information is needed if this practice is going to be implemented well in classrooms.

One aspect of close reading that has garnered a great deal of attention is the support that teachers can and should provide for students. More specifically, we were interested in finding out the answers to two important questions:

- How do you support students during close reading?
- Are there actions you take when students don't understand the text?

To answer the question about appropriate scaffolds during close reading, we interviewed 12 teachers, two each from grades 3 to 8 inclusive. These teachers were purposefully selected because they were widely recognized as leaders in close reading implementation.

Before each interview, we observed a close reading lesson in each teacher's classroom. As part of the observation, we collected field notes detailing the flow of the lesson and students' responses to the instructional event.

SCAFFOLDS DURING CLOSE READING

The teachers in this study identified four scaffolds that were automatically used as part of their close reading instruction. As a fifth-grade teacher

noted, "We used to rely on front-end scaffolds so that students would understand the text when they read it. Now we use scaffolds that are spread out over the course of the close reading." These distributed scaffolds include:

1. repeated reading,
2. collaborative conversations,
3. annotations,
4. text-dependent questions.

Repeated Reading

One of the scaffolds that teachers identified as part of close reading instruction lies at the heart of this instructional approach: rereading.

As teachers discussed this scaffold and we observed close reading lessons, we realized that they were not simply telling students to reread the text. Students were invited to reread in response to new questions that they formulated or that teachers asked—when there was a new purpose introduced. And students reread the text when they needed to provide evidence for their responses.

As we observed lessons, it became clear that teachers were providing guidance and support in a number of ways, including the flow of the text-dependent questions and the conversations that students were having about the text. A third-grade teacher said, "I used to have students reread, but I didn't really have them reread the texts for discussions, and it never occurred to me that they could be rereading social studies and science texts. Now we do!"

Text-Dependent Questions

As we discussed the various ways that teachers support students during close reading, it was clear that the questions they ask students are a critical part of the reading. One fourth-grade teacher said, "I have a lot of questions ready, and the questions help students pay attention to specific parts of a text, or even a word, that will help them get to the meaning of the text."

Another fourth-grade teacher said, "I tend to ask a few questions at once so that different groups of students take on questions that appeal to them. Then I walk around listening to them talking, to make sure that they are really getting it. If not, I can ask another question to support their thinking."

These questions are generally organized into three phases of complexity. Several of the teachers described an organizing framework they used to plan close reading lessons:

- *What does the text say?*
- *How does the text work?*
- *What does the text mean?*

In some lessons, students read or listened to the text twice before even beginning the discussion. In other classrooms, students read all or portions of the text three or four times to figure out how the text worked. In still other classrooms, students read the text several times based on the discussions they were having with their peers, with no instructions to do so from their teacher.

“As we observed lessons, it became clear that teachers were providing guidance and support in a number of ways...”

Collaborative Conversations

In every classroom we observed, students discussed the complex texts they were reading. Close reading was not a silent or independent activity but rather an interactive and inquiry-based experience. The co-construction of knowledge was what was most important. In most classrooms, students asked one another questions and displayed argumentation skills as they agreed and disagreed with one another about the information contained within the text. In several classrooms, we saw posters with sentence frames on them that provided students with support for engaging in these collaborative conversations.

As a fourth-grade teacher noted, “We have known for a long time that cooperative learning was a good thing. Close reading just lets us use cooperative learning with complex texts. I don’t have to tell students what to think about the text. But I do have to guide their conversations so they develop a new habit of figuring out what the text means.”

Another teacher said of her sixth-grade students, “I was worried they would give each other the wrong ideas, but that didn’t happen... they keep pushing each other for evidence from the text so they get to the understanding and I don’t have to tell them what the text means.”

Annotations

A fourth scaffold identified by teachers was the direct marking students did

on the text, either in print or digitally. These annotations may relate to confusing parts of the text or allow students to identify central ideas. In addition, the annotations should include written margin notes that contain questions, summaries, and inferences in the students’ own words.

An eighth-grade teacher stated, “Annotations are really about getting students to slow down and pay attention to the text. Annotating a text causes students to use their comprehension strategies, such as monitoring, questioning, clarifying, and predicting.”

A seventh-grade teacher commented, “When we started this, the students would just annotate when they first got the text. And their evidence was always from their initial understanding. We talked about this as a class and I reminded them each time we read that they needed to update their annotations...And their responses have really improved because it’s not just about the evidence, it’s also their thinking about the evidence that I’m looking for.”

THE SUCCESS OF CLOSE READING SCAFFOLDS

The vast majority of close reading lessons resulted in students’ understanding complex texts as evidenced by the products they created. These products ranged from written responses to debates to discussions that mirrored the Socratic Seminar approach.

In essence, close reading resulted in a much more sophisticated

understanding about the text. As a teacher said in a subsequent interview, “The students amaze me with their understanding of the text after close reading. I have really pushed up my expectations and the students are really doing well with it.”

And as a seventh-grade teacher noted, “Most of the time, close reading works beautifully and the process just gets them to a great level of understanding of the text. But sometimes I have to do a little more work to make sure that the students really understand.”

CLOSE READING ACTION PLAN

1. **Select** a text worthy of close reading. It should be complex enough to support multiple readings and discussions.
2. **Analyze** the text and list its qualitative factors of complexity, then keep that list near you as students read and discuss the text.
3. **Engage** students in a close reading of the text using the scaffolds outlined in this article. Make sure to clearly state the purpose for reading.
4. **Observe** students closely to determine whether they are making sense of the text.
5. **Collect** and analyze students’ annotations to determine “next steps” instruction.

This article was adapted from “Contingency Teaching During Close Reading” by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, which originally appeared in the December 2014/January 2015 issue of *The Reading Teacher*. Reprinted with permission.