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**Close Reading Without Tears**

*Nancy Boyles*

**Complex texts can be daunting for readers at any age. With picture book sets, teachers can build both young students' skill in tackling such texts and their will to read closely.**

I'd like you to read this text more thoroughly than you've ever read anything before, with incredible insight—and oh, by the way, this book (or poem or article) is really, really hard."

Although it's true that students often thrive on challenge, I can't imagine many young kids clamoring to be first in line for this particular task. Yet this is essentially what we're asking them to do when we engage them in close reading.

To be clear, I'm a huge fan of close reading. With or without the Common Core state standards, it's high time that students from the primary grades onward learned how to delve into a text and uncover one layer of meaning after another, to appreciate as much as possible a book's multiple themes, diverse points of view, rich language, unique structure, and other carefully constructed nuances.

As teachers with a solid grasp of all that a text has to offer, we can provide the instruction that will help even young students develop the *skills* for close reading. But will our teaching also inspire in them the *will* they need to embark with us on this literacy journey? For optimal results with close reading, we need to motivate as well as educate.

**Complexity Plus Coherence**

Of course, many factors contribute to students' motivation to achieve any academic goal, but I'd like to focus on one essential area where I see teachers beginning to veer off track: In our frenzy to implement close reading almost instantaneously, there seems to be a lot of randomness happening. I visit many elementary classrooms where teachers pull their class together on a rug and teach a nice close reading lesson around a complex picture book, poem, article, or excerpt from a longer text. But when I ask why that *particular* text and why *now*, I often get a blank stare: "Isn't it enough that I just found this complex text and taught this virtuoso close reading lesson?"

Well, yes—and no. Plunging into a sophisticated text with the intellectual rigor required for close reading is a worthy start. I'm gratified to note that so many teachers have taken to heart the shifts in scaffolding suggested by the Common Core language arts standards: less frontloading *before* reading; more text-dependent questions that address a full range of standards *during* reading; and oral response, not just written assessment, *after* reading. Pursuing these steps will teach students how to read more closely—and even, over time, to become independent close readers.

Teachers recognize such instruction as purposeful and focused. But do students recognize the purpose? Do they see how the close reading skills they are honing work together for some important outcome? If we want to obtain the most benefit from our close reading instruction, we'll need to help students connect the dots.

Connecting the dots means we'll need to show elementary students how the texts we use to teach them about close reading also teach them about important themes, topics, and other content. For maximum motivation, we'll also need to show them that this content has *coherence*—defined by the [Free Dictionary](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/coherence) as "a logical, orderly, and aesthetically consistent relationship of parts."

Education researchers have long noted that coherence is motivating. Bruner's (1976) spiral curriculum recognized the benefits of revisiting a focus area repeatedly through a sequence of instruction that moves systematically toward greater complexity, each new level building on knowledge that preceded it. More recently, Guthrie (2001) maintained that students become more motivated with "an ample supply of interesting texts that are relevant to the learning and knowledge goals being studied." And the Common Core's three anchor standards for reading related to "Integration of Knowledge and Ideas" also highlight the importance of connecting multiple texts (National Governors Association [NGA] Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). So how can we achieve this coherence and thus build young students' motivation to read closely?

**Enter Picture Book Text Sets**

A text set is a collection of literary and informational texts that all fit together in some way. That fitting together (or coherence) is the key ingredient here. The texts might fit together around a concept or theme, a topic, an author, a genre, a current issue or problem, or any other generalization.

There are some amazing picture books on the market today that offer plenty of complexity. With the added support of illustrations and other graphics, they build the background knowledge that students often lack when they come to a complex text, especially one related to an informational topic.

Open nearly any informational picture book to see what I mean: "Across its frozen seas, tiny algae begin to bloom on the underside of ice." Lacking a trip to the Arctic, your students (and perhaps even you) may not readily comprehend this sentence. But if you glance at the picture on page 8 of *North: The Amazing Story of Arctic Migration*, written by Nick Dowson and illustrated by Patrick Benson (Candlewick, 2011), you will immediately gain the knowledge you need to understand it. That visualization factor is what makes close reading come alive with picture books.

But the key to success in building coherence through text sets is the quality of the connection between texts. We're not just using multiple texts, but also exploring meaningful relationships, identifying significant points of comparison, and integrating ideas—all the while, attending to content standards.

**Designing Meaningful Text Sets**

I've worked with numerous districts on designing an elementary-level close reading curriculum centered on text sets of picture books. The final product varies according to each district's demographics and needs. But regardless of your circumstances, the options are limitless.

Examples of a few possible text sets are included in Figure 1. You can see from this figure that I like to organize my text studies around inquiry questions. Questions are dynamic. They jump up off the page and grab students' attention, begging for an answer supported by evidence. A question like *How do you see the moon—as an astronomer, an astronaut, a Native American, or a storyteller?* is motivational for couple of reasons. First, it presents students with a choice. Second, they're intrigued by the novelty. "I never thought about seeing the moon in all these different ways," one 4th grader commented.

**Figure 1. Some Powerful Picture Book Text Sets**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **INQUIRY QUESTION** | **ANCHOR TEXTS** | | | |
| **Who was Abraham Lincoln: The boy, the man, the president?**  **(Grades 2–5)** | *Honest Abe*  Edith Kunhardt, Malcah Zeldis | *Looking at Lincoln*  Maira Kalman | *Abraham Lincoln Comes Home*  Robert Burleigh, Wendell Minor | *Abe's Honest Words: The Life of Abraham Lincoln*  Doreen Rappaport,  Kadir Nelson |
| **How do you see the moon—as an astronomer, an astronaut, a Native American, or a storyteller? (Grades 3–6)** | *Faces of the Moon*  Bob Crelin,  Leslie Evans | *Moonshot: The Flight of Apollo 11*  Brian Floca | *Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back*  Joseph Bruchac, Thomas Locker | *The Man in the Moon*  *(The Guardians of Childhood)*  William Joyce |
| **The Underground Railroad: What choices would you make?**  **(Grades 3–5)** | *Unspoken* Henry Cole | *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman*  Alan Schroeder, Jerry Pinkney | *Night Boat to Freedom* Margot Theis Raven,  E. B. Lewis | *The Underground Railroad:*  *An Interactive History Adventure*  Allison Lassieur |

You can also see that I like the idea of four anchor texts. I propose introducing the texts one at a time, with opportunities for returning to reread and dig deeper—a hallmark of close reading. Your text set could include more anchor texts or fewer. The goal is to provide enough opportunities for text-to-text connections without introducing so many texts that the process becomes unwieldy.

You'll also want to sequence the books in your text set so they follow a logical order. Consider the study of Abraham Lincoln. *Honest Abe* (Greenwillow Books, 1998) is a good place to begin because it's a general biography spanning Lincoln's entire life. It provides a solid chronology and lots of information, and it's quite straightforward, without too many inferences required.

Following that, you might want to move to *Looking at Lincoln* (Nancy Paulson Books, 2012). This wouldn't be a wise choice for the initial text in the study because it features small details that don't follow a clear progression. However, the details add depth to the basic facts of Lincoln's biography.

Go next to *Abraham Lincoln Comes Home* (Henry Holt and Company, 2008). This is the story of the funeral train that carried Lincoln's body home from Washington, D.C., to Springfield, Illinois. The outpouring of sentiment shows Lincoln through a different lens, that of the 30 million mourners who lined the tracks to pay homage.

Finish this study with *Abe's Honest Words: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Disney-Hyperion, 2008). This book reviews the significant moments in Lincoln's life, but embedded throughout are quotes from his speeches. With three previous texts as a foundation, connecting a quote like "The moment came when I felt that slavery must die that the nation might live!" (p. 28) to Lincoln's accomplishments, is now a challenge that students are excited to embrace, not a scary task that overwhelms them.

Of course within any curriculum study based on a picture book text set, you will also want to incorporate other texts at students' instructional level for small-group work, as well as easier texts that students read independently. These small-group and independent experiences will reinforce the close reading skills you introduced during whole-class reading of complex picture books.

**Beyond Coherence: Critical Thinking**

Readiness for college and career—and for life—means that the texts students read should help them become critical thinkers. You will want to first probe each text individually with related text-dependent questions. But the power of text sets is in their potential for integration and the possibilities they offer for viewing texts through a comparative lens. With multiple sources to synthesize, the questions you ask should ultimately draw on the coherence *between* your texts.

Here are some questions aligned to the Common Core College and Career Anchor Standards for Reading (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) that will help students make important critical connections leading to significant insights. (Click here for a [downloadable chart](http://www.ascd.org/el0914boyles) showing an expanded list of questions related to the standards.) Wherever appropriate, students should be expected to point to evidence from the text to explain their answers to these questions.

***For Standard 1 (finding evidence):***

* In your opinion, which text in this study presents facts, numbers, or statistics that are the most surprising or interesting?
* Which text in this study raises the most questions for you? What are the questions?
* After reading all of these texts, do you have any unanswered questions? What are your questions?

***For Standard 2 (finding the main idea or theme, summarizing):***

* Do the texts in this study seem to have the same or different central ideas or themes?
* What different kinds of research do you think the authors of these texts needed to do in order to write them?
* How can you apply the central idea(s) in these texts to a current problem or issue today?

***For Standard 3 (analyzing how events, individuals, or ideas develop and interact):***

* Do the facts in these sources support or contradict one another?
* Which text shows the strongest connection between parts (for instance, between sequence of events and setting, or characters and central idea)?

***For Standard 4 (understanding word choice as craft):***

* Which text had the most positive tone (or seemed the most biased or generated the strongest feeling)? What words in each text led you to this conclusion?
* Looking at all of your texts together, choose [six] words that you consider the most important to understanding this topic. Why is each word important?
* Which author is the most persuasive? How does the author's word choice help persuade you?

***For Standard 5 (analyzing structure and genre):***

* For the texts you read in this text study, which structure seemed the most helpful to you? Why?
* Do these texts represent different genres or the same genre? What genre(s) are represented?

***For Standard 6 (assessing how point of view and purpose shape content and style):***

* Do these authors/characters/narrators seem to have the same point of view or different points of view?
* Do these texts all seem to have the same purpose or a different purpose?
* After reading all of these texts, I agree most strongly with [author] because \_\_\_.

***For Standard 7 (assessing multiple forms of text):***

* In addition to the print texts you read, you also viewed a [photo/video/website/other]. How did this non-print source add to or change your understanding or feelings about this topic?

***For Standard 8 (critiquing text):***

* Is the author of each text being fair to both or all sides of the topic?
* Do you trust all the sources you read?
* Is there any information in any of these texts that you question or think might not be correct?

***For Standard 9 (making text-to-text connections):***

* These texts all support a similar central idea. Identify the central idea. What is the same and what is different about the way each author develops this central idea?
* Which text in this study seems the strongest in terms of (message, character development, important facts, and so on)?
* Find another text that would add to your understanding of this topic. Why did you choose this particular text?
* Which text has the clearest connection to a problem or issue in the world today?

Of course, your questions should be not only aligned to the standards your state is using (Common Core standards or otherwise), but also customized to the texts you are studying; some questions will apply more directly to a particular text or text set than others will. Additionally, although many text-dependent questions will be asked *during* the reading of individual texts, most of the questions here are intended to be asked *after* reading all the texts. To best support students, allow them to reflect orally before responding in writing. This will inspire their best effort as they get their thinking down on paper. Think about how you can turn these questions into an opportunity for an authentic discussion, not simply another question-and-answer volley between teacher and students.

In the end, you will want to measure students' ability to synthesize information from all the sources they have read. Your goal is to motivate thinking that demonstrates a thoughtful understanding of problems and issues, openness to multiple points of view, a thorough understanding of key concepts, the capacity to synthesize and elaborate on central ideas, the ability to generate insightful inferences, and recognition of related implications and consequences.

**Thinking About Text Studies with Your Students**

How will you use the study of picture book text sets in *your* classroom to motivate students' close reading? Reflect on the questions below to get started.

1. What could you study with a picture book text set? (This could be a specific person, topic, genre, author, current issue or problem, or theme.)
2. What picture books appropriate for your grade level could be anchor texts for this study? (Brainstorm a longer list and then select the best ones.)
3. In what order will you teach your texts? (Remember to build toward more complex thinking.)
4. What conceptual understandings do you want your students to achieve through this study? (These concepts should be addressed by integrating all your texts.)
5. What text-dependent questions will you ask to challenge students' critical thinking? (Use the questions listed earlier as a place to start.)

The best part: Those text-dependent questions will motivate your students as they educate because they will grow from the connections forged from some of the most beautifully crafted books available to young readers. In the end, the most motivating factor in our reading instruction will always be the quality of the texts we place in front of the students who will read them.

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