Joining the Conversation On Close Reading

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I remember the time of my very first close reading experience, although at that time I was only about six and words like close reading were about as familiar to me as kale, and other non-white foods.

It involved a two-page spread from my incredible, beloved, and well worn copy of Go Dog, Go. (Readers familiar with this book are probably already salivating in anticipation of the eye feast I am about to describe). In this epic illustration there are maybe thirty dogs engaged in various activities *in a tree.* I still remember the flurry of questions and comments this page evoked in me: *Why do they live in a tree? Where are their beds? Why are those dogs together? How do they get up there? Oh wait! Here is how they get up there!* And then…*WAIT! Are these the same dogs that are in the rest of the book?!?!* Thus began an endless flurry of flipping where I would track the dogs through their illustrations until they ended in that eye popping two-page illustrative spread. I got to know personalities: *The one in the orange shirt is always being silly*, I got to study deep relationships: *That short one and that big one are always together, are they married?* I got to work on experiencing a window into another world: *I would totally sleep on the top of that tree, but I am probably going to need a rope or something so I don’t fall off.*  Through it all I would hunch over the book, sometimes pulling back to take in the glory of the colors and interactions, and other times I would lean in so close my nose would almost be touching the page to better see the details and nuances on each dog, literally close reading.

I see this in kindergarten students all the time, both the ones I teach in New York City and the ones in classrooms I have consulted in over the years. The moment they are swept into a page and their posture instantly changes, they hunch over, fingers tracking across some aspect of the illustration, a quick flip back and forth between pages and the inevitable screech for a friend to look at what they just noticed.

Chris Lehman and Kate Roberts, two of the most brilliant and kind people I know, have started this amazing blog-a-thon around close reading and one of the questions that’s been popping up is: do we teach it to the primary kids? Should we? What is the relationship of this joyful literal close reading, and (*insert thunder claps*) **Close Reading** *(insert thunderclaps*) as we see it being talked about in the world today?

**Teaching Close Reading in Primary Grades is Like Teaching The “Ready Position”**

When I was about five I joined a t-ball team. Like many five year olds, I was terrible, but it didn’t matter. T-Ball isn’t about getting people to buy tickets and get advertisers, its about teaching habits and stances that baseball players have in the real world. I was in the outfield and my primary goal was to stay in the “ready position”taught by my coach: knees slightly bent, glove out, eyes on the ball. The ball never came to me that year, but over the next 15 years that I played, it did and I was *ready*.

So much teaching in the primary grades is about building stances. Overcoming failure for example. We give kids small challenges- like rebuilding the blocks that fell down- so that later in life they can overcome big challenges because they have the stance *failure is when I grow, not when I stop*. (For more on this I beg you, BEG YOU, to read Mindset by Carol Dweck). After talking with Chris, I feel more clarity that what we teach in the primary grades is not “THE” close reading, but more of an emergent close reading, the stance that when I come in contact with a text, I want to slow down, linger, study, ask questions, so that when the metaphorical ball comes to our students, they are *ready*.

**Teaching Students to Look, Linger, and Learn**

Across my day students interact with texts, but I think I could be getting more out of this time. If I think the stance of looking and lingering is meaningful I need to teach more of it throughout the day: in shared reading, read aloud, reading workshop, and choice time. Here are a few ways that have worked for me in the past, and a few that I am hoping will work for me in the future:

* Stop on pages with glorious illustrations and use your finger to track the action, touch each part of the picture especially noticing how parts interact.
  + For example: In Marla Frazee’s beautiful book *Roller Coaster* there is a two page spread showing a line to the ride, lingering here and talking about facial expressions and postures has real payoff.
    - What are you noticing in Marla Frazee’s illustration?
    - Who do you think is in this line together? How do you know?
    - Look at his face! What is he thinking?
    - Look at this guy at the front of the line, make your body like his body… what does that make you feel?
    - The words say it is someone’s first time on the ride, who could it be in this line?!
    - Imagine the conversation these two people in line are having… what could it sound like?

* Teach into basic artistic principles when talking about drawing or studying illustrations: colors can indicate mood (A second grader once described knowing something good was happening when there was yellow, *because good things happen on sunny days*) , size determines importance, placement shows feelings. The words on a page often interact with these illustrative techniques, so study them both together
  + Your art teacher is a good reference for this, but so also is Molly Bang’s book for teachers: *Picture This: How Pictures Work*
  + You do not need to teach this in a: “Today I will show you how this character is more important because he or she is bigger in the picture” type of way, but rather ask: why do you think the illustrator drew this person bigger? What do you think when you look at these two people? Or “Why do you think the illustrator chose this color?”
  + Expect answers like: he is bigger because he is taller, in the beginning. Remember we are teaching towards “ready position”.

* Teach that sometimes you really do have to “get close”, show how you move the book close and far, use a magnifying glass or even block off part of page so you can really study another part.
  + Have these available during independent reading time, during read aloud and shared reading take advantage of the zoom on your document camera

* Look for, and encourage, replication. As young children try to make sense of something they often try to recreate it in their own way. After a close study of the way Marla Frazee represents action (often she draws the same object repeatedly across the page to show momentum) several children attempted something similar in their own writing, we then did a close study of that work: why did you show this? What would it have looked like if you didn’t do that?

Children who learn this stance of looking, lingering and wondering about the choices the author or illustrator have made are practicing skills that will evolve into (*insert thunderclap)* **The Close Reading** (*insert thunderclap)* that our upper grade colleagues are talking about. I think we have a duty and a responsibility to lay this groundwork in a developmentally appropriate and meaningful way. What do you think?