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Learning Cycles That Deepen Students' Interactions with Text

Adults in the school system understand the need to deepen students' interactions with text.

In fact, it's pretty obvious why they do. As individuals who are successful in their daily lives, they have developed sophisticated ways for interacting with text that ensure they understand what they've read. Those deep interactions with text occur in the workplace and in higher education.

For example, Angul, a food services manager at SeaWorld, has to read a wide variety of documents in a given day, from employment applications to invoices, as well as guest compliments and complaints and memos regarding park operations. We asked her to collect the texts she read on a given day so that we could determine their complexity. We discovered that this job, obtained soon after Angul graduated from high school, required that she regularly read texts at the postsecondary level.

But did Angul know in middle school that would be a job requirement? And would telling her in middle school that she would someday have to read diverse, complex texts at work have made a difference in terms of her interest in reading such texts before she was expected to do so? We think not. And that's a problem. In many conversations about deepening students' interactions with texts, there is a lack of relevance. Teachers know why students should read a text deeply, but students often don't. If a close analytic reading is going to work, teachers must ensure that students are inspired by the texts they read. And by inspired, we don't necessarily mean that they have a visceral reaction and want to save a whale, even though sometimes texts do elicit strong responses from readers.

Thankfully, there are things that teachers can do to inspire their readers. And part of that inspiration comes from really understanding what the text says. We have summarized our ideas for inspiring readers in a reversible poem. Take a minute to read the text in Figure 1. Reversible poems present the same words forward and backward, but the meaning changes slightly when the text is read in the reverse order. It's kind of like coming full circle to develop understanding.

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Read multiple complex texts and
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Figure 1. Reversible Poem about Complex Texts

So what does truly understanding the text mean for teachers? We see this as a cycle that begins with a compelling question and then involves reading and writing, with a chance for students to use the information they have learned to share with others, which in turn invites them to ask more questions, once again facilitating additional reading, learning, discussing, and identifying still more new questions. But to be even more practical, we'll explore each of those phases in greater depth.

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1. Compelling Questions

As McTighe and Wiggins (2013) note, essential questions are motivating. Students are invited into a text by the right question because they want to know the answer to the question. They learn that both literary and informational texts have answers to the big questions in life. They also learn that the answers may surprise them, and further that authors, characters, and contexts shape the answers. Although teachers can create the questions, we have found it very useful for students to brainstorm a list of questions and then to have them vote, as a class, on the questions they want to address.

For example, the following questions are among others selected by middle school students over the past few years:

- What is your superpower?
- How do the choices we make affect the world around us?

- Do we change the world or does the world change us?
- Is social media really social?

It's important to note that these compelling questions should not give away the ideas within a text, but rather the question should inspire students to read widely to determine what they think about the question.

2. Close Reading

The next step is to teach students to read complex texts closely. A great deal has been written of late about the procedures for close reading, such as annotating a text and rereading it to deepen understanding (e.g., Boyles, 2013). Both of those steps are appropriate habits that students must develop as they learn to read closely. But even applied in tandem, they are insufficient to ensure that students understand complex texts deeply.

One key to deepening students' understanding of texts during close reading involves the questions that teachers ask. The questions ultimately take students on a journey, from the literal level to the structural level to the inferential level. We have organized this journey as three overarching questions (Fisher, Frey, Anderson, & Thayre, 2014):

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

Figure 2 is a list of sample text-dependent questions that align with each phase of deepening students' interaction (and, by extension, their understanding of the text). The questions are not

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simply context for checking student understanding but also serve as primary scaffolding for students in terms of understanding the text. Readers start with a literal understanding of the text. As they reread, discuss, and think about the text, they develop a richer understanding of the text's structure. Following that, they begin to make logical inferences and deepen their understanding even further. In other words, text-dependent questions play a critical role in students' understanding, as do the discussions students have with their peers.

3. Collaborative Conversations

Simply stated, learning is a social endeavor. To really deepen students' interactions with texts, they must talk about those texts. They must stake a claim and provide evidence for their ideas. They must follow the rules of discussion, remain on topic long enough to interrogate their ideas, and ask questions of one another. Of course, each of those behaviors must be taught. Students require a lot of practice if they are to engage in the types of collaborative conversations that will guide their understanding. We have found it particularly useful to provide them with sample sentence frames that they can use to guide them as they discuss complex texts with their peers.

Unlike some implementation efforts, the sentence frames that we recommend are aligned with the cognitive moves of argumentation. There are different frames for making a claim and supporting a claim, for example. Figure 3 highlights a sample list of sentence frames that are useful in guiding students' collaborative conversations. The goal is to use those

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Phase	Content components	Sample questions
1) What does the text say?	• General understanding • Key details	• Why does Anne have a diary in the first place? • What kind of "early life" did Anne have? • Describe Anne's family and social circle. • What restrictions were placed on Jews? • Explain Anne's feelings about school. What evidence supports your opinion?
2) How does the text work?	• Vocabulary • Text structure • Author's craft	• What does the saying "paper is more patient than man" mean? How is this relevant to Anne beginning her diary? • How does Anne's style in writing about the restrictions placed on Jews affect the tone of this entry? • Describe the passage of time in this entry. • Describe the tone of this entry. • How does Anne share that the situation in Holland is progressively getting worse?
3) What does the text mean?	• Inferences • Opinions and arguments • Intertextual connections	• What is the purpose of this entry from Anne? What is she attempting to get across to her diary, Kitty? • Describe whether Anne is able to connect with other people she knows. What leads you to think this? • Explain what was happening in Germany during 1933 that would motivate the Frank family to flee to Holland.

Source: Fisher, D., Frey, N., Anderson, H., & Thayre, M. (2014). *Text-dependent questions, Grades 6–12: Pathways to close and critical reading*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Used with permission.

Figure 2. Sample Text-Dependent Questions

frames to move students' conversations beyond the sentence level. By modeling conversations for and with them, students realize that language exchanges grow through interactions that involve the creation of sentences connecting several of the sections shown in Figure 3. It's important to remind students to be as intent on listening as they are on speaking.

4. Being Inspired

None of us, much less our middle school students, read texts closely only so that we can say we read texts closely. We read closely and want to deepen our interactions with texts when there is something important and worthwhile to do after the reading. And that is the answer to the question: Why should students care about deepening interactions with text? Because they are inspired. They are inspired to engage in research and investigation. They are inspired to present or debate. They are inspired to continue discussing a text, perhaps even with a Socratic Seminar. And they are inspired to write about the text.

Consider an Anne Frank diary entry, since most middle schoolers read this text. What might students be inspired to do, if they really did understand the text deeply? Some might want to write in response; others might want to engage in research; and still others might want to debate or discuss the situation. In other words, the students would care about their deepened understanding of the text. They would realize that the processes we've used, from the compelling question to the close reading to the collaborative conversations, are valuable. As Jeff Wilhelm would say, reading the text would be in service of something much more important.

And, having been inspired by the texts, students would want to read more, read better, and ask new questions. Thus the cycle begins again and middle school English becomes a forum for inquiry and investigation. And that would serve students well. We end by encouraging you to select texts that both inspire and challenge your students, and of course involve them in this process. Doing so creates

Making a claim	I observed _____ when _____. I compared _____ and _____. I noticed _____ when _____. The effect of _____ on _____ is _____.
Providing evidence	The evidence I use to support _____ is _____. I believe _____ (statement) because _____ (justification). I know that _____ is _____ because _____. Based on _____, I think _____. Based upon _____, my hypothesis is _____.
Asking for evidence	I have a question about _____. Does _____ have more _____? What causes _____ to _____? Can you show me where you found the information about _____?
Offering a counterclaim	I disagree _____ because _____. The reason I believe _____ is _____. The facts that support my idea are _____. In my opinion _____. One difference between my idea and yours is _____.
Inviting speculation	I wonder what would happen if _____. I have a question about _____. Let's find out how we can test these samples for _____. We want to test _____ to find out if _____. If I change _____ (variable in experiment), then I think _____ will happen, because _____. I wonder why _____? What caused _____? How would this be different if _____? What do you think will happen if _____ / next?
Reaching consensus	I agree _____ because _____. How would this be different if _____? We all have the same idea about _____.

Source: Ross, D., Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2009). The art of argumentation. *Science and Children*, *47*(3), 28–31.

Figure 3. Language Frames for Argumentation

a cycle of entwined competency and engagement that results in students becoming more proficient readers who keep on reading.

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