Using Writing to Support Close Reading: Engagement *and* Evidence from the Text

Close reading must raise engagement and joy, not diminish it.
(Lehman & Roberts, 2013, p. 5)

"Writing has helped me to become a better reader," Keenan (all students' names are pseudonyms) wrote about his year spent in the Literacy Lab, a reading and writing support program for 12 eighth graders whose literacy skills were below grade level according to standardized tests.

We found that writing in literacy notebooks, alongside reading, increased engagement and improved understanding of texts. At the beginning of the year, Keenan, like most of his Literacy Lab peers, did not consider himself a reader or a writer. As teacher-researchers, we sought to investigate the origin of the students' admitted distaste for school-assigned texts, so we conducted paired interviews and asked students to complete Literate Learner profiles, eight-sectioned graphs we created to help us better understand students' reading and writing habits, interests, goals, and strengths in and out of school. From this data, we learned that most of the students consistently abandoned school-assigned texts. Reasons for not reading included characters not close to students' age, lack of interest in the story, and inability to follow plots that "bounced around."

The Shift from Not Reading to Close Reading

The problem that we faced is one we believe many language arts teachers share: How can we teach students who do not consider themselves readers to stick with texts, to read and reread, and to read closely? In this article, we show student examples of how literacy notebooks effectively supported close reading by helping students interact with and enjoy texts. We will explain the format of the Literacy Lab, describe the notebooks themselves, and show how using the notebooks helped the students read more closely.

Our literacy program was simply formatted; we read aloud and discussed the text, then wrote responses to the reading. We wanted the students to see reading and writing as reciprocally related: The depth and strength of reading could enhance writing and vice versa. We encouraged students to develop the habit of reading with notebooks open, pen in hand. Keeping a literacy notebook (shown in Figure 1) as we read helped us:

- Return to texts for second and third readings.
- Attend to the author's word choice, style, and purpose for writing.
- Interpret texts using evidence.
- Find joy in reading through engagement and connection.

The notebook included three sections: Words, Style, and Response. We asked the students to

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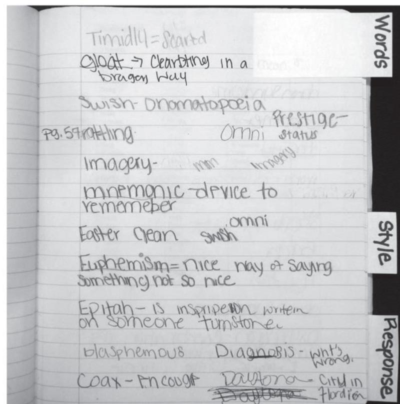

Figure 1. Sample page from a student's literacy notebook.

write in their Words section unfamiliar words that needed to be defined as well as words they especially liked and might use later in their own writing. At first we had to remind students to keep their notebooks open as we read, and to record unknown or interesting words, but by midsemester, most of the students were doing so on their own. At the conclusion of each reading portion of our workshop, students could share words they had recorded, and as we looked back at the sentences where the words appeared in the story, we often reread a small section of those passages.

The Style section provided a similar opportunity for close reading. For that section, students made note of phrases, sentences, or passages that stood out to them, skills required by the College and Career Readiness Anchor (CCRA) standards of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Reading (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). For example, in *Locomotion*, we explored Jacqueline Woodson's (2004) sensory details, considering how the author's word choice was significant to the meaning (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, R.4), to the text structure (R.5), and to main character Lonnie's point of view (R.6). In his notebook Deshawn recorded, "city so gray you'd think we live inside a big old gray box" (Woodson, 2004, p. 49). The students pointed out in discussion that these were ordinary words that an eleven-year-old boy would probably use, but they painted a picture in the reader's mind of how Lonnie viewed the city in "Just Nothing Poem." Lonnie is miserable in that part of the story, and the colors he describes are dark. Later in the book, as he spends time with his sister and is happier, the sensory details are brighter, reflecting his improved internal weather. Students noticed this shift, and their habit of recording phrases in their notebooks helped them maintain an awareness of the author's language, style, and text structure that moved from gray to sunny as the narrator made peace with his life and began to enjoy it.

The literacy notebooks helped students read with curiosity and responsibility . . . Curiosity and responsibility led to engagement.

Following the read-alouds, students reacted to the story in the Response section of the notebook. They were free to respond personally, but they were required to cite evidence from the text (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, R.1). "I liked *Locomotion* because I liked how he [Lonnie] talked in the book," Santianna wrote. Jacinta agreed, writing "[*Locomotion*] came from a child's point of view." I pressed for specificity: How does Lonnie talk that makes his language seem like a child's? "He doesn't always use good grammar," Jacinta replied, pointing out Lonnie's use of "ain't" and double negatives. Again, students reread the text to find support for their ideas.

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

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In the article, students looked at texts with their heads, hearts, and the texts. In this lesson plan from ReadWriteThink.org (http://bit.ly/1r93QHF), students determine meaning of a text by approaching it from three perspectives: experiential, textual, and interpersonal.

Lisa Storm Fink
www.ReadWriteThink.org

Close reading became a habit of the heart reinforced by written response. The literacy notebooks helped students read with curiosity and responsibility. What interesting words should be recorded? What words need definition or clarification? Curiosity and responsibility led to engagement. Engagement occurred because students read closely. They examined the author's word choice, the text structure, and the narrator's point of view. Far from a clinical dissection of the text, close reading coupled with space for personal response helped the students feel connected to the story because they knew the text. Figure 2 shows the connections between the reader's personal connections and the text evidence through close reading.

Developing the habit of reading carefully to discover interesting individual words, phrases, and personal connections required attention and led to better comprehension.

Close Reading as Cause and Effect of Engagement

Close reading seems both a cause and effect of engagement, a procedure and an outcome. The group read *No Crystal Stair* (Nelson, 2012), about Harlem bookseller Lewis Michaux. The book contains narrative passages and primary source data such as FBI memos and newspaper articles. Lewis's brother Lightfoot encourages a marriage that he hopes will change his brother's drinking and gambling habits. As we practiced a close reading of a prayer Lewis's fiancée writes just before the wedding, LaRae became interested in the arranged marriage. "If that was me, I would not do that," LaRae declared, and she later wrote about the difficulty of committing to someone "you rarely notice, barely recognize, and (are) not even close to being in love with." LaRae wanted to write about this section, so she knew she had to read closely. For *Locomotion*, it was the author's shift in word choice that engaged students more fully in close reading; for *No Crystal Stair*, it was the characters who emerged in close reading that engaged LaRae.

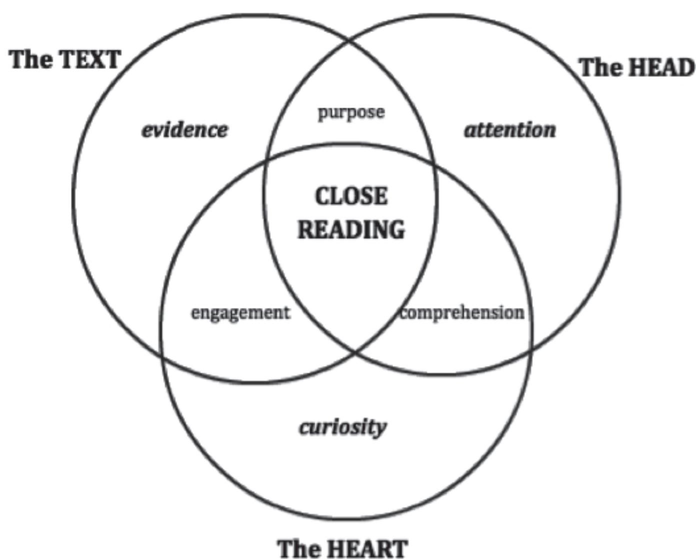

Figure 2. The close reading connections.

Our literacy notebooks helped the students become curious readers. A class discussion revealed that the students felt that Woodson created anticipation by hinting at how Lonnie's parents died and what had happened to his sister. "We didn't know a lot about Lonnie's life at first," Santianna wrote, explaining that she enjoyed *Locomotion* because it seemed suspenseful, and she wanted to keep reading. The students remarked that several mysteries surfaced early in the story, and they had to read on to solve them. Those unknowns are similar to the way students described other stories "bouncing around," as Lonnie moves from one setting to another and frequently goes back in time. However, because the students were intentionally recording words and phrases, they were able to follow *Locomotion* more easily. What might have seemed confusing in an earlier reading experience now was suspenseful and captivating.

Developing the habit of reading carefully to discover interesting individual words, phrases, and personal connections required attention and led to better comprehension. Understanding the texts led to emotional investment. The students stuck with the texts and kept reading. Table 1

Table 1. Connecting the Head, Heart, and Text: Student Notebook Examples

Book Title	The Head (words to clarify)	The Heart (personal response)	The Text (evidence from the book)
Locomotion (Woodson, 2004)	Vaporize–to disappear; the words "zapped" from Lonnie's head	Why does Lonnie use his writing and his voice?	Lonnie's voice helps him keep his parents' memory alive, like in the poem "Memory" on page 8 and the poem "Fire" on page 86.
No Crystal Stair (Nelson, 2012)	Power–controlling influence Caul–birth defect, means lucky	Lightfoot holds the power in Lewis's family, which is not fair.	Lightfoot was born with a caul over his face. His mother believed "he was destined to some high mission." He led the church, which made him more powerful. Page 20, power = Bible and religion.
Fire from the Rock (Draper, 2007)	Incredulous–not willing to believe	Why is this so unfair? I was so mad and sad! I was shocked! He was trying to save Sylvia, but he did not have a right to blow up Mr. Zucker's store.	It was Reggie who set off the firebombs! (page 180)

provides further evidence of the connections detailed in students' notebooks.

Conclusion

While our research does not suggest that a literacy notebook is a panacea for the problem of getting students who do not typically engage with or enjoy text to read closely, it does offer one solution. Writing supported close reading by meeting several CCRA standards:

- Reading "closely" and citing "specific textual evidence" (R.1)
- Reading closely with deep comprehension and critical thinking, analyzing the way that "ideas develop and interact" (R.3)
- Interpreting "words and phrases," evaluating "how specific word choices shape meaning" (R.4)
- Examining the "structure of texts" (R.5)
- Determining how "point of view shapes a text" (R.6)
(NGA & CCSSO, 2010)

The literacy notebooks integrated these essential skills with personal connections as the students wrote in their Response sections. Whether close reading should entail readers' personal connections has been debated recently in the literacy education field (Pearson, 2013; Shanahan, 2012). Beers and Probst (2013) address this issue in their text on close reading, *Notice and Note:*

> Close reading, then, should not imply that we ignore the reader's experience and attend closely to the text and nothing else. It should bring the text and the reader *close* together. To ignore either element in the transaction, to deny the presence of the reader or neglect the contribution of the text, is to make reading impossible. (p. 36)

Beers and Probst contend that close reading and personal connection can and should coexist. Their argument is shaped by Rosenblatt's (1993) *transactional theory*, the idea that readers make meaning of the text by interacting with it, bringing their own ideas, connections, life experience, and knowledge.

The conflict over whether a reader's opinions or personal history should surface in reading is similar to a long-standing argument among those who research and teach written response to text. How much of the student's voice should be heard in written responses to text? Substan-

tial research has shown that writing in response to text increases text comprehension (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Personal response to text yields higher comprehension than purely analytical writing. Often the personal connections allow a student to think critically and independently, whereas sometimes the analyses or interpretations without the personal connection can simply parrot the teacher's ideas or arguments (Marshall, 1987; Mulcahy-Ernt & Ryshkewitch, 1994; Newell, 1996; Wong, B., Kuperis, S., Jamieson, D., Keller, L., & Cull-Hewitt, R., 2002). However, it is easy to understand how personal response in writing can veer so far from the text itself that it becomes, as Stotsky (1995) warned, an exercise in "self-centered" writing (p. 773). In our study, literacy notebooks made it possible for students to connect personally with the texts while simultaneously requiring text evidence.

Writing helped students to read curiously, attend to the text, and stick with stories instead of abandoning them in frustration.

Our data show that the literacy notebooks effectively balanced personal response with close reading skills. Writing helped students to read curiously, attend to the text, and stick with stories instead of abandoning them in frustration. End-of-study Literate Learner profiles highlighted that students' perceptions of themselves as readers shifted from the beginning of the year. "I am a better reader now that I have been in this program," LaRae wrote, adding, "I understand what I read."

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Michelle Medlin Hasty is a former secondary English Language Arts instructor and currently teaches at Lipscomb University, where she works with literacy coaches through a university partnership with Metro Nashville Public Schools. **Katie Edwards Schrodt**, NCTE member since 2010, a former elementary school teacher, is a doctoral candidate and instructor at Middle Tennessee State University, where she works with preservice teachers in best literacy practices.