

Two Misconceptions About Close Reading

“Every good teaching idea becomes a bad idea the moment it hardens into orthodoxy,” says Robert Pondiscio in this article in *The Education Gadfly*. He believes there’s a danger of that happening to close reading.

According to literacy expert Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago), close reading is “an intensive analysis of a piece of text, in order to come to terms with what it says, how it says it, and what it means.” Close reading immerses students in challenging texts that stretch their abilities, which, says Pondiscio, “requires supporting students via multiple readings, providing vocabulary, working in pairs or groups, and posing questions designed to lead students to understand the text, among other techniques.” David Liben of Student Achievement Partners says, “When close reading is done well, you have weak readers who never would have had the chance to deal with rich, complex text in the ballgame, grasping it, learning from it, and feeling good about it.”

But this powerful classroom practice can go off the rails if teachers (a) over-use it, and (b) have students close-read without drawing on background knowledge. On (a), only a small part of reading instruction should involve close reading, says Pondiscio. “There’s little to be gained in ‘practicing’ close reading on any ol’ text as long as it’s sufficiently difficult. The work we put in front of kids should be worth the time it takes to read them repeatedly and thoughtfully. If the work isn’t stimulating, it’s unlikely to stick.”

On (b), some teachers are being advised to have students close-read a text as if they know nothing about the subject matter. “This seems crazy to me,” says cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham. “It doesn’t just seem crazy,” says Pondiscio. “It *is* crazy. It’s impossible not to bring your prior knowledge to reading... Writing is not interpretive dance. When authors commit words to paper, they do so expressly to create associations in the reader’s mind... Students may lack background knowledge to fully appreciate a work of literature or an historical document. But it does no good whatsoever to keep them in a state of ignorance on purpose, let alone make a virtue of it.”

So close reading should be used sparingly and strategically, concludes Pondiscio, and teachers should draw on and build students’ knowledge every time they use it.

“How to Kill Reading Achievement” by Robert Pondiscio in *The Education Gadfly*, October 1, 2014 (Vol. 14, #40), <http://edexcellence.net/blog-types/common-core-watch>