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Close Reading and Close Writing

Close reading entails a critical analysis and examination of any content, whether it is print, film, music, painting, maths, design, nonfiction or fiction, speeches, plays and so on. Close reading is slow reading. It is reading that ratchets up attention to detail. In this chapter, we look at how teachers can foster a sensitivity to detail and word choice in order to promote more attentive thinking habits. We also look at using visualisation as an effective comprehension tool when attempting to decode complex material.

Close reading is essentially a more text-centred method of moving students to deeper comprehension. Often, it entails multiple passes over the text with a different purpose guiding each reading. Students might read the material the first time for the main idea and overall meaning. The teacher's questions and consequent activities will reflect this purpose. The next reading might revolve around what choices the author has made regarding, for example, point of view or tone, and require students to analyse the implications of those choices. The third reading might then move to how this text relates to other texts or to the reader's life, values and experiences. The product of this reading would be close writing – a critical analysis using a compare and contrast structure. This close writing moves in tandem with the purposes set by the teacher for each consequent reading. Here the connection between reading, writing and thinking is most authentic. Both close reading and close writing are the doorways to building students' capacity for sustained rigorous practice and robust comprehension.

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The Need for Rigour

Richard Strong, Harvey Silver and Matthew Perini (2001) write that rigour is what is required of students for understanding content that is "complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging" (p. 57). Much of what occurs in classrooms that is referred to as rigour doesn't come close to fitting this definition, however. Instead, we often see teachers labouring under the misconception that rigour means giving out more worksheets or assigning more problems, that learning next year's material a year sooner is rigour, or that rigour means giving writing assignments for a select few students. But as Barbara Blackburn (2008), author of the book *Rigor Is Not a Four-Letter Word*, explains:

> True rigor does more with less, preferring depth over breadth. Next, rigor is not just for your advanced students. Rigor is for every student you teach. That includes your students who are at risk of failure, your students with special needs, and your students for whom English is not their native language … [T]he heart of authentic rigor is learning, not punishment. It is about growth and success, not failure. (p. 15)

I've found that to be able to plunge into rigorous work with a class, there must be both adequate preparation on my part and the existence of a warm, supportive environment. If a teacher believes the student holds the lion's share of responsibility for learning and therefore is at fault for failing to progress adequately, the student senses this and shuts down. When teachers establish instructional strategies with literacy as a primary focus in an enriched environment, however, the outcome is an atmosphere where risk-taking does not result in high stress and responses of fight or flight. According to Marian Diamond and Janet Hopson

(1998), reading and writing depend on a set of cognitive skills that thrive in environments that are rich in positive emotional support; stimulation of the senses; absence of undue pressure or stress; pleasure; novel challenges; opportunities to use whole-child range of skills; opportunities for choice, personal assessment and modification; fun; and active participation. All of these elements need to be in place for a truly nurturing environment to exist and for cognitive learning to result in the freedom for students to take risks and not close down.

When teaching is rigorous, students are up to their elbows in higher-order thinking experiences, in analysing and evaluating as well as creating. And they love it! When we invite students to think and act like artists, engineers, historians, politicians, doctors, scientists, lawyers and CEOs, when our students play intellectual dress-up and rehearse for real-time careers, they are developing and strengthening the brain – preparing themselves to function in an unpredictable future.

How a teacher nudges students into exercising their latent thinking processes makes all the difference between a feeling of success and a refusal to even try. Many children would rather be considered troublemakers than seen as 'dumb' in front of their peers. They refuse to take educational risks for fear of experiencing possible failure and humiliation. Too often, as well, teachers feel that rigorous instruction is out of the reach of those who don't possess a firm foundation in basic skills. Year after year, these students are subjected to the drudgery of reams of worksheets and rote learning. The teacher must therefore function as a kind of artist, carefully planning a sequence of experiences to guarantee students a series of first successes that will serve to fuel motivation and effort.

As Richard Jones (2008) of the International Center for Leadership in Education observes, instruction must be not only rigorous but relevant:

> While it is essential that students acquire fundamental skills before they proceed to more complex work, teachers should not keep students hostage by requiring that they complete all the isolated basics before they have the opportunity to engage in challenging and applied learning experiences. Relevance is just as critical as rigor. Relevance can help create conditions and motivation necessary for students to make the personal investment required for rigorous work or optimal learning. (p. 5)

In the end, there is no linear, clear-cut alignment of skill acquisition that can be prescribed to all students. Real learning is always messier than most manuals and logic-driven explanations would lead us to believe. We emphasise rigour because most students pick up the basics as their innate hunger for higher-order thinking experiences are fed. Jones (2008) warns us that "teachers should not keep students hostage by requiring that they complete all the isolated basics before they have the opportunity to engage in challenging and applied learning experiences" (p. 5). The entryway into this state of grappling with complexity, ambiguity, provocation and personally challenging material begins with close reading.

Slowing Down the Eye

For years, students have equated speed with competency, and this glorification of speed is reinforced by the fast-paced culture that surrounds us. We all know students are extremely proud of themselves when they can indicate with a swiftly raised hand that they have finished before anyone else. When we teach students how to intentionally slow down their normal reading pace, we are sometimes met with surprise. The very word *slow* has negative connotations for many. Students placed in the 'slow group' in early year levels later find that stigma difficult to remove. Of course, the need for building fluency in reading and writing

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legitimately pushes this quest for speed, yet it should be balanced by the recognition that speed isn't the only indicator of reading competency.

Close reading promotes a rediscovery and awakening of sensitivity to the power of words. Wordplay should be a staple of every teacher's literacy backpack – one of those strands embedded into the delivery of all content and instruction. Wordplay is not simply vocabulary study; it has a much more whimsical energy about it that runs on the fuel of curiosity, experimentation and playfulness, and is supported by a non-judgemental environment. A great outlet for a teacher's creativity is to devise as many short, novel wordplay mini-activities as possible that serve to punctuate the normal flow of instruction. In creating wordplay, I urge teachers to work with passages from books they are currently reading or with books that will be used later in the school year. Here are a few examples.

A Princess of Mars

The Walt Disney movie *John Carter* (Stanton, Andrews & Chabon, 2012) is based on Edgar Rice Burroughs' (1917) character of the same name, and is derived from the first of his Barsoom series of science fantasy books, *A Princess of Mars*. Filled with tremendous action and swordplay scenes, this book is perfect for expanding our students' understanding of how authors vary their word choice. We ask the class to describe the actions that are found in a typical fight scene and reduce their responses to a short list – one that can be further reduced to the two words *hit* and *move*. Then we discuss why the author wouldn't just use these two words all the time.

Now we photocopy the passage we are working with. Because the written word alone is only half-alive – our students need to *hear* it as well as see it, building a picture in their minds so it can come to full, robust life for them – we invite them to go back over the passage and highlight the substitutes this author uses for *hit* and *move*, using one colour for the *hit* words and another colour for the *move* words. Using the reproducible 'How Authors Pick Their Words', they write their selected substitute words in the columns on the right-hand side of the paper. Figure 1.1 shows what a typical student product might look like. After ten minutes of hunting, highlighting, sorting and debating just how far to stretch the meaning of *hit* and *move*, we discuss with students how effective they find this technique to be. Finally, students circle their favourite substitutes, jot them down in their notebooks under a title like *My Choice* (or, *Cool Words* or *Curious Word Finds*), and share with each other.

Choosing the Words Ourselves

Linked to this activity is a flip-side activity in which students substitute more vivid words. We take a few short, plain sentences and use an online or print thesaurus or a photocopied list to provide possible additions and substitutions – chiefly for the verbs, but also for the nouns, adjectives and adverbs. We do this with three or four short sentences at most. Core sentences (with the corresponding thesaurus entries to look up) might be:

1. An old person is walking down the street (*old*, *walk*).
2. A boy takes off his stinky socks (*take off*, *stink*).
3. Loud music is coming from a passing car (*loud*, *passing*).
4. A waitress clumsily drops a tray of food (*clumsy*, *drop*).

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How Authors Pick Their Words:

My beast had an advantage in his first hold, having sunk his mighty fangs far into the breast of his adversary; but the great arms and paws of the ape … had locked the throat of my guardian and slowly were choking out his life, and bending back his head and neck upon his body … In accomplishing this the ape was tearing away the entire front of its breast, which was held in the vise-like grip of the powerful jaws … Presently I saw the great eyes of my beast bulging completely from their sockets and blood flowing from its nostrils … Suddenly I came to myself and, with that strange instinct which seems ever to prompt me to my duty, I seized the cudgel, which had fallen to the floor at the commencement of the battle, and swinging it with all the power of my earthly arms I crashed it full upon the head of the ape, crushing his skull as though it had been an eggshell.

Without more ado, therefore, I turned to meet the charge of the infuriated bull ape. He was now too close upon me for the cudgel to prove of any effective assistance, so I merely threw it as heavily as I could at his advancing bulk. It struck him just below the knees, eliciting a howl of pain and rage, and so throwing him off his balance that he lunged full upon me with arms wide stretched to ease his fall. Again, as on the preceding day, I had recourse to earthly tactics, and swinging my right fist full upon the point of his chin I followed it with a smashing left to the pit of his stomach. The effect was marvelous, for, as I lightly sidestepped, after delivering the second blow, he reeled and fell upon the floor doubled up with pain and gasping for wind.

List Words That Mean *Move*:

sunk	advancing
bending	throwing (him off)
bulging	lunged
flowing	swinging
fallen	reeled
swinging	fell
turned	doubled up
charge	

List Words That Mean *Hit*:

locked (the throat)	threw
sunk (fangs)	struck
choking	swinging fist
tearing away	smashing
crashed	delivering
crushing	blow

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Figure 1.1: How authors pick their words.
Source: A Princess of Mars *by Edgar Rice Burroughs (1917). Kindle Edition, p. 16.*

Neither of these exercises takes long. After the second one, we ask students to read their newly minted sentences, and we show approval for their elegant substitutions and additions. This is wordplay. We don't sully the feeling with a heavy layer of judgement. We don't deduct points if a student uses a word incorrectly while reshaping the sentences or if a student placed a wrong word for *hit* or *move* in one of the columns. The exercise is a direct attempt at both dampening the fear of failure many carry into the classroom and showing them that risk taking is welcome. This is not the time for assessment but for revelation about how words work.

Choosing the Actions and Words

An important follow-up to these two short exercises is to ask students to decide on an action scene they will write themselves. We brainstorm a large pool of possibilities together and pick two or three words that are the most dominant action words, like *hit* and *move* in the previous exercise. They then make a word bank of alternate words. The fact that the students know they are going to use the word bank they develop for a specific purpose gives the activity even more meaning and relevance.

Students now begin writing. After they finish the drafts of this short action piece, they exchange them with a neighbour or read them aloud in their three- to four-person writing group, asking their peers to guess the core words for which they exchanged substitutes. Another approach is to have students write the core words on the bottom of the paper and ask a partner to find the substituted words in the written scene. Basically, we are mimicking the previous wordplay assignment we completed, but this time with student-produced texts.

Working With a More Difficult Text

After these activities, we want to see what taking on a more difficult text can be like. In doing this, we always start small. Nothing closes down the enthusiasm for trying to figure out a hard-to-read text like assigning one that is too long too soon. This activity is based on a passage from the novel *Iron Council* by China Miéville (2004), the winner of myriad literary awards. Miéville describes himself as a fantasy geek who writes weird fiction. The activity, 'Puzzling Out Meaning', involves reading the following evocative but somewhat obscure passage a few times to discern what it's about, answering a few simple questions, and guessing from context the meaning of unfamiliar words.

> Rudewood teemed. Birds and ape-things in the canopy spent the morning screaming. In a zone of dead, bleached trees, an ursine thing, unclear and engorged with changing shapes and colors, reeled out of the brush toward them. They screamed, except Pomeroy who fired into the creature's chest. With a soft explosion it burst into scores of birds and hundreds of bottleglass flies, which circled them in the air and recongealed beyond them as the beast. It shuffled from them. Now they could see the feathers and wing cases that made up its pelt.
>
> "I been in these woods before," said Pomeroy. "I know what a throng-bear looks like." (Miéville, 2004, pp. 13–14)

Students generally do a better job on this task than adults because of their closer access to the worlds of fantasy and imagination. When they are successful at deciphering the text, they are immensely proud of themselves! These types of short passages serve as great training wheels for longer, more complex texts they will encounter later.

Exercising Our Close-Seeing Abilities

When teachers introduce vocabulary and literary terms as the first part of a lesson, students' first experience with new material is often as scribes – copying down what a teacher has written or typed on the SMART™ Board or computer screen. But any vocabulary word or subject-specific term is an abstraction of experience. If we are concerned with and interested in having our students involved in close reading that is sensitive to detail and yields a deeper understanding before dipping into close reading itself, I suggest training them in the act of close seeing. Exercises that do this by calling on more of students' senses will yield far faster results when we move their attention to print.

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