

Common Core's Focus on 'Close Reading' Stirs Worries

Academic leaders say shift may be a leap for teachers

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What would happen if English/language arts teachers revolutionized their instruction to focus intently—and exclusively—on the texts students are reading?

That's what chief academic officers from 14 urban school districts discussed here last month. It's a key shift in the Common Core State Standards that now guide teaching and learning in all but four states: Students are expected to engage in "close reading" of complex literary and informational texts.

In contrast to common practice, in which teachers explain reading passages and supply background information before students read, "close reading" confines initial study to the text itself. Students make sense of it by probing its words and structure for information and evidence. Through questions and class exercises, teachers guide students back through the reading in a hunt for answers and deeper understanding.

That scenario, however, requires profound shifts not only in how teachers teach, but how districts choose texts, how they test what students know, and how they evaluate teachers.

Gathered for a leadership-network meeting facilitated by the Aspen Institute, the chief academic officers of the 14 participating districts expressed praise for the approach. But they also had

deep concerns about providing the type of professional development necessary to deliver it well in their districts. To preserve the frank, problem-sharing nature of the meeting, the Aspen Institute asked that *Education Week* not quote district leaders by name.

"I'm really worried that we haven't prepared our teachers for this," one chief academic officer said. "The academic and cognitive demand [on teachers] is quite high."

The officials spent part of a day walking through an example lesson on close reading with David Pook, a New Hampshire teacher who helped shape the common English/language arts standards. He built the lesson around a selection that one of the network districts, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., has been using with its 6th graders: an excerpt from Russell

Freedman's *The Voice That Challenged a Nation*, about Marian Anderson's historic recital at the National Mall in 1939.

The chief academic officer "students" were asked to read the passage silently, without any context or background knowledge supplied by their "teacher," Mr. Pook, except brief word definitions listed in the margin. They explored "text dependent" questions that he had developed to help students understand the meaning and structure of the passage. The answers to such questions lie in the passage itself and help students make inferences and follow the arguments in it.

One such question was: "What words did Freedman use to characterize what happened next?" A key point of the presentation was that students could not expect their teacher to answer that for them. Instead, teachers would take what Mr. Pook called a "let's find out" approach, guiding students to the passage for answers.

One of the chief academic officers said that such a process represents a more significant change for teachers than they might realize. Most of his teachers, he said, would quickly say they already ask those kinds of questions.

"They'll say, 'Yeah, I always ask what happened next,'" he said. "But that's not the question. The question was, 'What words did Freedman use?'"

His colleagues, along with Mr. Pook, smiled and nodded. Moving teachers toward this way of working will require "some significant professional development" as they learn to refrain from providing quick answers, figure out instead how to formulate new kinds of questions that take them and their students back to the text repeatedly in their search for understanding.

The idea, Mr. Pook said, is that this work "moves students toward independence" by developing their abilities to build vocabulary and access a text's structure; grasp a text's meaning and build arguments from it based on evidence in the text itself; and eventually build the confidence to grapple with tough reading on their own.

Too Much Change?

Some longtime reading advocates doubt the basic approach of "close reading," noting that the wide variations in background knowledge that students bring to reading makes it necessary for teachers to build bridges toward them to make sure all students can access the material successfully.

"Ideally, having all students just go ahead and read the text can level the playing field," said Richard M. Long, the director of government relations for the International Reading Association. "The attempt is to make it just about the text. But it is never just about the text. Our concern is that this doesn't take into account that prior experience exists and always affects the way the student interacts with the text."

None of the chief academic officers at the Aspen meeting criticized "close reading" as a goal, and most lauded it. But they saw a rocky road ahead in reaching it.

How, for instance, would they build skill among their educators to provide sufficient supports for struggling readers, special education students, and English-learners to tackle text this way? How would teachers respond to a "sea change" that reframes their role from provider of information to facilitator of inquiry? And where would they get deep, focused lessons for such instruction?

"The percentage of my teachers who weren't ever taught some of the skills you're talking about here, like the 'pivot point' in a paragraph," said one official, her voice trailing off in a sigh. "The teachers themselves don't know many of those concepts."

Curriculum Materials


Some of those who led in drafting the common standards have created "publisher's criteria" in mathematics and in English/language arts that are intended to guide publishers in creating curriculum materials that embody the intent of the common standards. States and districts, too, are creating their own materials, as are a host of organizations. Many intend to make them freely available, but most are not yet complete, and there is no centralized location for those that are.

Likewise, many private groups have been publicizing professional-development offerings for the common standards, even as some of the common core's strongest proponents express skepticism that "drive-by" sessions can accomplish the change that is required by the new standards.

A number of districts, including those in the Aspen network, are starting to design their own professional-development modules. Even as they do that work, though, officials from large districts worried about how they will ensure that thousands of teachers have a sufficiently deep understanding of the key shifts in the standards, as well as district supports to design lesson plans and other materials.

During a break in the meeting, a group of chief academic officers brainstormed about approaches to professional development in a big district. A "train the trainer" model risks dilution of effectiveness as it gets farther from the original trainers, and yet it's an immense challenge to free hundreds of teachers at once to attend sessions with experts, they noted.

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 A link to information about the Aspen Institute's Urban District Leadership Networks is provided at edweek.org/links.