

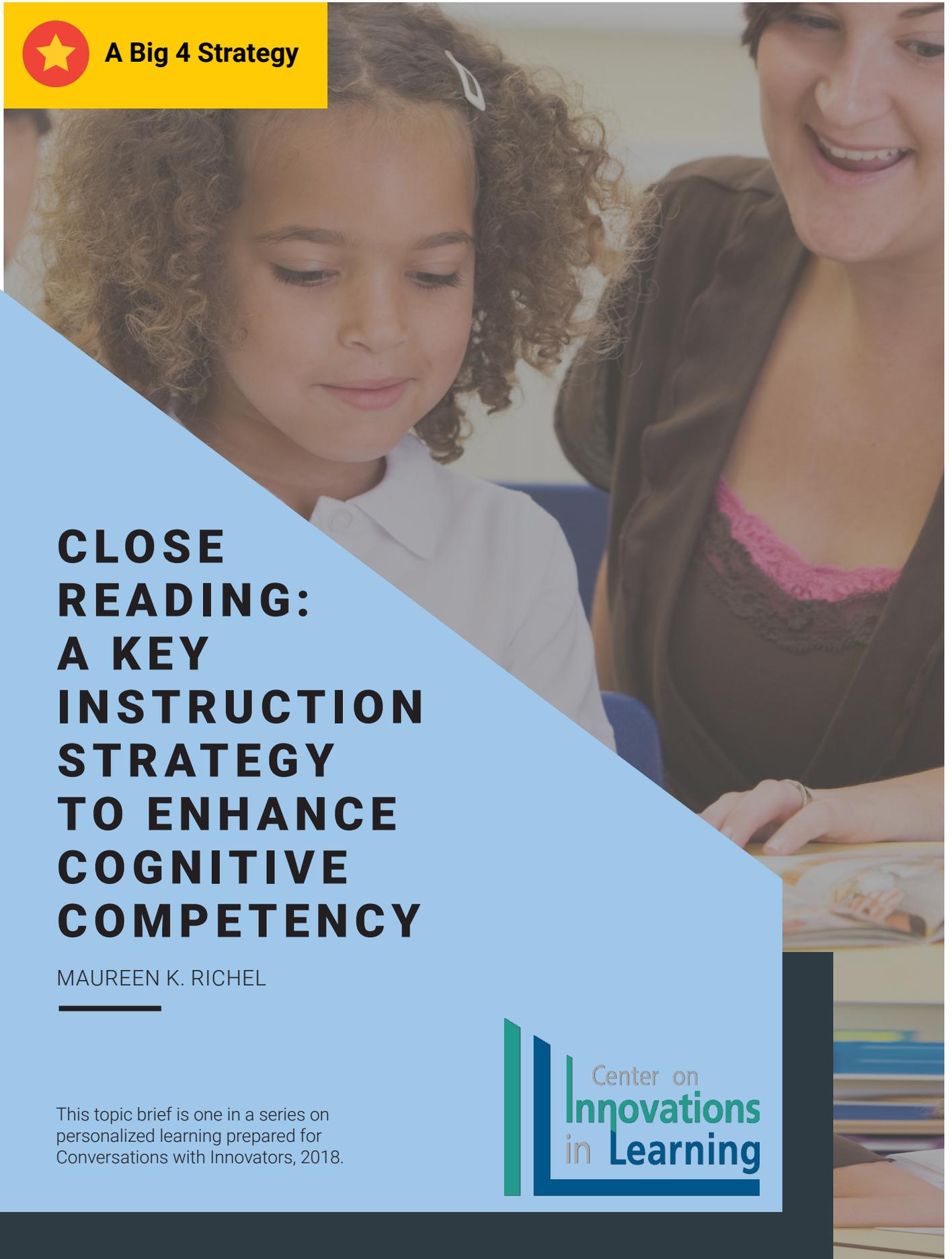


A Big 4 Strategy

CLOSE READING: A KEY INSTRUCTION STRATEGY TO ENHANCE COGNITIVE COMPETENCY

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OVERVIEW

A close and careful reading experience of complex text, implemented correctly, for any age-level learner, is a complementary instructional strategy that strongly supports a teacher's goal to personalize learning for each of her students. It is critical to understand that the purpose of planning for and engaging students in a close read is not to teach the mechanics of "how" to read. Rather, effective teachers continually equip both novice and maturing readers with an integrated combination of skills that employ key literacy principles such as phonemic awareness, word analysis, phonics, sight words, fluency, and comprehension. Doing so can make engagement with text both practicable and meaningful. A close reading lesson, planned and delivered well, facilitates, or makes easier, for the reader a deeper understanding of complex text. Deeper understandings impact the levels at which students are able to think critically. As recently as 2015, the World Economic Forum listed critical thinking as the fourth most important skill that, globally, employers seek (Albright, 2016). As a matter of fact, the same group projects the skill of critical thinking to rise to the number two spot by 2020, and as defined by the philosophy department at the University of Hong Kong (Lau, 2011), critical thinkers can do the following:

1. Understand the logical connections between ideas.
2. Identify, construct, and evaluate arguments.
3. Detect inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning.
4. Solve problems systematically.
5. Identify the relevance and importance of ideas.
6. Reflect on the justification of one's own beliefs and values.

Involving learners in a close reading experience sets the instructional stage for teaching and implanting the six aforementioned critical thinking attributes. Educators have been charged with ensuring our students are college and career ready. If thinking critically is a vital skill that employers seek, then close reading provides a path for teachers to teach it and students to acquire the ability to do so. Many states have adopted English language arts and literacy standards that do more than oblige us to build critical thinkers who are ready for college and career. Because too often in classrooms and on high-stake tests, we have asked students to defend their thinking in written form using evidence, these evolved and current standards now wisely compel us to engage learners in critical collaborative thought through evidence-based discussions first before asking them to defend their thinking about text in evidence-rooted writing. Close reading provides the certain occasion for students to mutually discover meaning. First, before being asked to write using evidence, a close reading lesson encourages these communal learners to collaboratively talk about the evidence and to pinpoint it guided by questions that are text dependent, forcing readers and collaborators to return to the text and have simulated conversations with the author to find the proof that defends their collective thinking, understanding, inferences, speculations, and conclusions about the author's intended meaning of the text. And what better way than through a close reading lesson to address, develop, and build capacity in the personal competencies—cognition, metacognition, social emotional, and motivation—each an essential component in personalizing learning. These competencies are discussed later in this paper.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

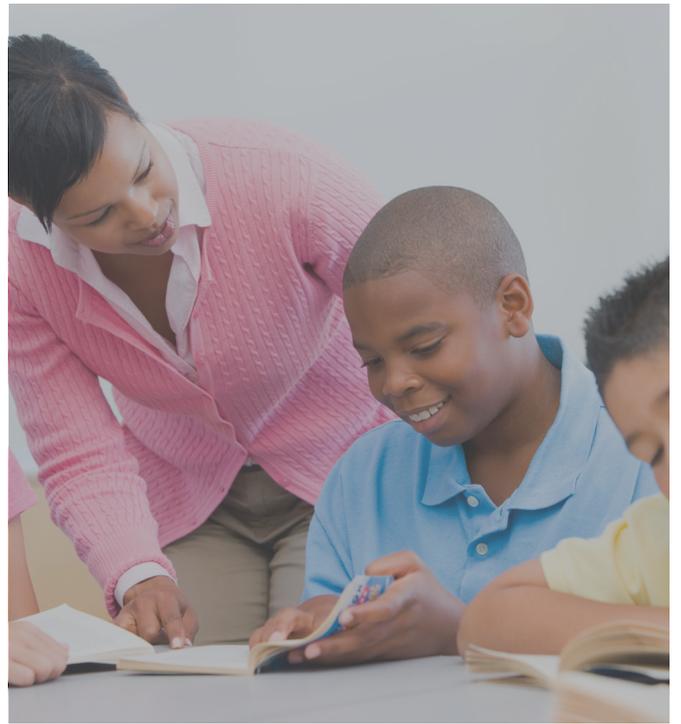
Two authorities in the arena of close reading and writing using evidence are Dr. Douglas Fisher and Dr. Nancy Frey, both professors of educational leadership at San Diego State University. Fisher and Frey adhere to the definition of close reading provided by the Aspen Institute, a policy and education studies group (Brown & Kappes, 2012):

Close Reading of text involves an investigation of a short piece of text, with multiple readings done over multiple instructional lessons. Through text based questions and discussion, students are guided to deeply analyze and appreciate various aspects of text, such as key vocabulary and how its meaning is shaped by context; attention to form, tone, imagery, and/or rhetorical devices, the significance of word choice and syntax; the discovery of different levels of meaning as passages are read multiple times. (p. 2)

Using this definition as an origin for their thinking, Fisher and Frey (2015) describe five interrelated, prominent close reading lesson components or features indispensable to the learner in a close read. The first is selecting the “just right” piece of complex text—“just right” meaning short and complex and “short” meaning manageable in length. This might mean a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages of a passage that can be

read and discussed for its truth—its deeper meaning—within a class period. A complex text is multilayered in meaning, worth revisiting at least three times to gain the literal, structural, and inferential nuances chosen for employment by the author to impact the reader. “Complex” is different in meaning than “difficult.” Not all complex text is difficult, and not all difficult text is complex. For example, a technical manual on biotechnology may be hard to read and understand, but it probably does not have layers of meaning to peel back to gain deeper insight.

The next feature of a close reading lesson is repeated reading.



The learners revisit the text for various purposes such as getting the gist of the text and exploring the intentional, instructional choices an author makes to impact and influence readers and to isolate evidence—strong and worthy enough to support their thinking, inferences, claims, and conclusions about the text.

Annotation is the third key ingredient to successful close reading. Annotation by its definition is a note of explanation or comment added to text or a diagram. To annotate means more than underlining, highlighting, or circling words on page. What matters more than these marks are the reasons a reader chooses to underline, highlight, or circle key words and phrases. These reasons are expressed in the explanations or comments in the margins of the text. Essentially, annotation slows down the reading process for the learner—and we want the reader to slow down to enable deeper, critical thinking to flourish and thrive. We want the reader, through her annotated explanations and comments in the margins, to start talking back to and with the author of the text. A close read reaches beyond an isolating, independent activity. It encourages shared learning, which is accomplished through civil discourse meant to enhance understanding and discussion that funnels to subterranean insights about the text's meaning.

Finally, because close reading is not a “one and done” read, the teacher crafts text-dependent questions (TDQs) that determine a purpose for revisited readings and drive readers back into the text for each repeated read, seeking perhaps novel or expanded understandings. In a nutshell, the first-read TDQs force the reader to find and comment on key words, phrases, and details that help basic summary of the text. The second-read TDQs ask the reader to examine the structural and mechanical choices the author has made to impact the reader. For example, how does Lewis Carroll make a reader feel by crafting a very lengthy, Chapter 1, third sentence that reads:

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!” (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.” (Chapter 1, paragraph 3, 1865)

Do readers feel as crazed and out of breath as Alice and begin to understand that sometimes a run-on sentence, much discouraged previously by well-meaning teachers, might be an author's technique to influence the reader? During the second read in which students look for structural elements, the close read allows students to understand more clearly the techniques and “tricks” of writing that authors employ. Students may then store these ideas away for the next time they write. However, for early writers, it is still important to learn good writing techniques. It is only a very seasoned author who is able to “break the rules” when appropriate for a desired effect. You have to know the rules before you can break the rules.

TDQs for the third-read assist the learner in locating evidence for the deepest levels of critical thinking: inferencing, speculating, supposing, and concluding. Too often students, new and veteran, are asked to make critical thinking inferences without having traveled up the ladder, supportive steps from literal to structural to inferential? Fisher and Frey (2015) promote and recommend a well-planned close reading lesson that will scaffold these steps for readers and in doing so alleviate greater struggle in attempting to arrive at a deeper meaning.



HOW CLOSE READING APPLIES TO PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Personalized learning varies the time, place, path, pace, practice, and trace of learning for each student; enlists the student in the creation of learning pathways; and uses technology to enhance the learning process. **Personalization** refers to a teacher's relationships with students and their families and the use of multiple instructional modes to scaffold each student's learning and enhance each student's **personal competencies (cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social/emotional)** (Redding, 2014). According to Redding (2014), the prominence of personal competencies becomes importantly apparent within the framework of personalized learning. A foundational underpinning of personalized learning assumes a student's will or desire to learn and her learning efficacy are boosted when her teachers use their relational suasion to ascertain how best to personalize or customize learning by granting the learner choice in what and how to learn, extensive access to a variety of resources, and continuous and timely feedback regarding progress in the learning.

Why Include Close Reading as a Personalized Learning Strategy?

A teacher strengthens a student's metacognition by intentionally teaching specific learning strategies and techniques such as active listening, note taking, strategic reading, and annotation; teaching the procedures of logic, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation for use in critical thinking; and teaching techniques for divergent thinking to expand the universe of considerations in creative thinking. A close reading lesson uses social and emotional competency when students apply the previously taught techniques for appropriate questioning to obtain information, seek help from others, and engage others in conversation using cooperative learning techniques in small group work. And finally, a close reading motivates students by finding text that inspires students to think beyond the text pages and stretches the students' interests to find value in new topics (i.e., acquired relevance).

An effective close reading lesson addresses and augments all four personal competencies with specific, actionable, instructional techniques. A close reading lesson uses techniques such as



assigning rich (complex) reading,



applying the reading in written work and discussion,



encouraging each student's curiosity by providing pathways of exploration and discovery, and



using writing assignments to connect new learning with prior learning and deepen understanding (i.e., cognitive competency).

Practical Application of Close Reading

1 Adopt and adhere to common discussion procedures.

Some initial, foundational steps include adopting and adhering to common discussion procedures. Because facilitated, close talk conversations—in other words, civil discourse—leads thinkers to elevated levels of comprehension and deeper levels of understanding, establishing and reinforcing protocols for discussion is a critical, primary step for advancing critical thinking. One commonly used discussion norm is **SLANT**. **SLANT** is an acronym that stands for sit up straight; lean in, look at, and listen to the speaker; answer using evidence, not emotion, and act interested; nod up and down in agreement and nod left to right to disagree; and take turns talking.

2 Keep annotation protocols simple.

The act of annotating requires readers to slow down their thinking and have a conversation with the text by underlining key phrases and details; circling the unfamiliar and confusing; and most important, making a note in the margin next to each underline or circle to capture the thinking at that moment as to why they made those text marks. In addition, teachers may equip readers with three different colored pens to differentiate the annotation that occurs with each of the three repeated reads of the same text. It is not unusual for savvy students to figure out that good annotation can jump start a related writing assignment, which helps to reinforce the use of annotations skills.





3 Choose a “just right” text.

To choose a text, remember that a “just right” close read is short in length, can be managed within a class period, is complex with rich layers of meaning to be revealed with each subsequent read, and typically inspires learners to go beyond the borders of that page as it stretches their interest in expanded or related topics. There is no need to front load the text or back fill knowledge for the first-read encounter because a major tenet of a close read is for a community of learners to mutually discover and co-construct meaning based on text evidence.

4 Allow enough time.

A close reading lesson may span the course of a week. There is no intention to recommend that three reads be completed in one lesson period.

5 Prepare TDQs for each read.



TDQs establish the purpose of each sequenced read. TDQs direct and scaffold learners to progress from the literal meaning to the structural choices an author makes to impact and influence readers to the inferential. The sequence is important. Before we ask learners to infer text-related meaning, they must first understand the gist of the text. Next, students explore the structural options the author exercises because these choices can and do denote tone, mood, and purpose. After students grasp the literal and structural options, they use this understanding to make evidence-based inferences, speculations, suppositions, conjectures, and conclusions about a complex piece of text. In addition, teachers should provide sentence stems (i.e., evidence enforcers, answer anchors) for the TDQs for students to use as a launch pad for entering the close reading discussion and to assist students in focusing on the question at hand and not stray too far off point or jump ahead.

6 Read the text aloud.



Remember that we are not trying to teach students “how to read” during a close read but how to think critically about what they hear or can read. Thus, it is perfectly acceptable and even encouraged to have the teacher read the text aloud for the first read. Doing so allows both struggling and skilled readers to devote their energies to “just listening” to the teacher’s inflection, intonation, rhythm, and prosody, which will affect interpretation of the text and its message and meaning.

SUMMARY

Intentionally and thoughtfully designed close reading lessons that select the just right, short, manageable, complex text worth revisiting and rereading at least three times for literal, structural, and inferred meaning followed by a facilitated close and careful discussion about the text's intrinsic layered meanings provides the platform for a community of learners to mutually discover and cement literal, structural, and implied meanings. Fashioning close reading opportunities into standards-driven lessons allow the teacher to teach in a meaningful, purposeful, and efficacious manner while simultaneously embedding personalized learning techniques into the close reading lesson. Doing so serves to enhance the personal competencies believed to be a reagent for both in-school and out-of-school success.



GLOSSARY

1 Close reading:

a thoughtful, critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details or patterns to develop a deep, precise understanding of the text's form, craft, meanings, and so on

2 Cognitive competency:

prior knowledge that facilitates new learning; includes curiosity focused on mastery that is retained in memory

4 Motivational competency:

engagement and persistence in pursuit of learning goals

5 Personal competencies:

the individual's interrelated cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social/emotional competencies that facilitate learning and other forms of goal attainment

3 Metacognitive competency:

self-regulation of learning and use of learning strategies

6 Personalized learning:

learning in which personalization ensues from the relationships among teachers and learners and the teacher's orchestration of multiple means for enhancing every aspect of each student's learning and development

7 Relational suasion:

the teacher's ability to influence a student's learning, motivation to learn, metacognitive competencies, and social/emotional competencies by virtue of the teacher's personal knowledge of and interaction with the student and the student's family (Redding, 2013).

8 Social/emotional competency:

sense of self-worth, regard for others, and emotional understanding and management to set positive goals and make responsible decisions

9 Text-dependent questions (TDQs):

text-related questions that can be answered only by referring to the text being read

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