

# Letting the Text Take Center Stage

How the Common Core State Standards Will Transform English Language Arts Instruction



BY TIMOTHY SHANAHAN

There is an iconic childhood moment that spans generations. My father, a boy in a clapboarded, one-room schoolhouse, along with the only other student in his grade, endured it; I timidly shared the experience with 50 Pattys, Connies, and Billys shoehorned tightly into an amber-lit classroom; the children I taught did it (seemingly a lifetime ago); and the young teens I watched last week in the midst of a middle school science lesson, their teacher patrolling the aisles, persevered at it as well.

The event to which I refer is the one in which a teacher leads a group of students in the communal act of reading a text. Such communal reading events are usually aimed at transforming children into readers or exposing them to science or social studies information. This event has been repeated so often in each of our

lives that it may seem more like a Norman Rockwell painting than an actual memory: the boy wiggling in his chair, the dutiful pig-tailed girl, the teacher's opaque questions, children's hands waving in the air, a monotone child's voice quavering as it makes its way uncertainly up the street of sentences.

One can also easily imagine a visit from the proverbial Martian anthropologist. Considering the ubiquity of communal reading, or what I call "the reading lesson," and its sameness across otherwise diverse classrooms, it would likely be classified as ritual. And as ritual, this little green observer would try to determine which of the actions maintained any discernible functional purpose and which had become purely symbolic, persisting mainly for the sake of tradition. Social scientists have long speculated about the reason for rituals; many now think they express and reinforce the shared values and belief systems of a society.<sup>1</sup> Our extraterrestrial visitor would surely want to know more about our reading lessons.

But we'll come back to that.

## Common Core State Standards

In 1989, members of the National Governors Association (NGA) agreed to take the lead on educational reform. The agreement called for states to set educational goals or standards, with some federal assistance.<sup>2</sup> By the early 1990s, all 50 states had done so, but not necessarily standards rigorous enough to propel students

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toward college or career readiness—nor was there leverage to ensure that even these undernourished standards would be reached by sufficient numbers of students.<sup>3</sup>

In 2002, this changed in a big way. No Child Left Behind became the law of the land, and it put federal financial support for education at risk if students failed to meet a state’s standards. The result wasn’t higher achievement, however. Instead of working more diligently to meet these standards, most states simply reduced their already low criteria to keep the federal dollars flowing.<sup>4</sup>

In 2009, the NGA, now in concert with the Council of Chief State School Officers and with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, endorsed the idea of common or shared educational standards across states. Instead of each state setting up

its own idiosyncratic goals in math and reading, this plan would have all or most states striving, for once, to accomplish the same outcomes. By the time the dust settled, a new set of standards had been written and adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia (this is the number that embraced the English language arts standards, but only 45 states accepted the math goals—Minnesota made a split decision).

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), as they are known, are a major advance not only because of their shared nature, but also because they represent a more rigorous set of goals than most individual states had previously adopted. The standards’ authors were plainspoken in their claim that these were new learning goals, not methodologies, for teaching:<sup>5</sup>

Fact: The best understanding of what works in the classroom comes from the teachers who are in them. That’s why these standards will establish *what* students need to learn, but they will not dictate *how* teachers should teach. Instead, schools and teachers will decide how best to help students reach the standards.

And yet, these standards will likely lead to the greatest changes in reading instruction seen for generations. One of the biggest transformations will be to reading lessons, involving changes that will upset traditional approaches that have been in place for decades. These communal reading lessons have gone by many names (e.g., directed reading lessons, guided reading), but all variations include a group of students reading a text together under the supervision of a teacher, and it is that daily event that will change most.

### Matching Students to Books versus Having Them Grapple with Challenging Texts

Past educational standards have been stated in terms of cognitive behaviors or actions that students must learn to exhibit. For example, here is a typical fifth-grade reading goal, this one from

**Table 1** Comparison of Texts Written at Different Challenge Levels

“I can work,” said Dick.

“I can help Mother.”

Jane said, “I can work too.

I can help.

Look, Dick.

This is for Father.

Father will eat here.”

SOURCE: WILLIAM S. GRAY AND LILLIAN GRAY, *FUN WITH DICK AND JANE*, FIRST PRIMER (CHICAGO: SCOTT, FORESMAN, 1946–1947), 34.

Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencod’s roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.

Kidneys were in his mind as he moved about the kitchen softly, righting her breakfast things on the humpy tray. Gelid light and air were in the kitchen but out of doors gentle summer morning everywhere. Made him feel a bit peckish.

SOURCE: JAMES JOYCE, *ULYSSES* (NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE, 1961), 53.

Virginia, one of the four states that did not adopt the CCSS: “The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fictional texts, narrative nonfiction, and poetry.”<sup>6</sup> Some of the ways the students have to demonstrate this ability is by describing character development, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, and summarizing supporting details from such texts. As such, standards tend to be verb-centric; they describe a whole lot of locating, inferring, connecting, and comparing.

This characteristic Virginia standard describes a cognitive action students are to do, but it does not tell how well students need to do it or what the level of challenge should be. Prior to the CCSS, standards usually ignored the fact that some texts are harder to read

## The Common Core State Standards will likely lead to the greatest changes in reading instruction seen for generations.

than others.<sup>7</sup> Drawing inferences or making comparisons in an easy text is, well, easy, while trying to do so in a more complicated one is quite another thing. Look at the simple comparison of *Fun with Dick and Jane* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (see Table 1 above).<sup>\*</sup> Even with such brief segments, it should be apparent that making sense of the old primer is a much easier lift than making sense of the modernist classic. Dick simply doesn’t do much beyond running and jumping, while Leopold Bloom’s day is a rich mix of goings-on. Dick is narrow, too, in emotional terms, but Bloom displays an

<sup>\*</sup>By the end of high school, the Common Core’s recommended texts are very complex—complex enough to prepare students for college-level texts like *Ulysses*.

impressive gamut of hope, reluctance, lust, regret, envy, self-satisfaction, uncertainty, trepidation, and relief. Analyzing characterization in one book is a major intellectual challenge, while doing so in the other is a necessary, though comparatively modest, accomplishment along the road to literacy. This is a big difference, and yet past standards couldn't distinguish any difference. By ignoring the challenge level of texts, standards made it look like students were reaching goals even when performance levels were embarrassingly low; remember this the next time someone tells you that their previous state standards were every bit as demanding as the CCSS<sup>8</sup>—they are, if one only looks at the verbs and ignores the texts those verbs operate on.

## Students will be more frustrated by challenging texts, and this means instructional supports will be needed to help and encourage them.

Think of it this way: if states had adopted weightlifting requirements, instead of reading requirements, past standards would have said “all students should do bench presses,” but would have omitted any mention of how much weight had to be on the bar or how many reps were expected. Let's face it, bench-pressing 5 pounds once, which almost all of us could do, is nothing like bench-pressing 100 pounds 10 times, which few of us could do. And that is what we have been doing: emptying particular mental gymnastics during reading, without consideration of challenge levels.

The CCSS change that equation. At each grade level, there are 10 reading comprehension standards. The first nine note the same kinds of cognitive processes long emphasized in standards, but

the 10th one, in grades 2 through 12, sets a specific level of text challenge.

What is the problem with this for teachers? It flies in the face of everything they have been taught. Reading authorities have been dogmatic about the value of appropriate book placement, and the need to differentiate book placement by reading levels has been the major approach to differentiation;<sup>9</sup> this is where ideas like the old “three reading groups” and the more recent “book rooms” have come from. The claim has been that there is a special text level at which students should be taught if they are to make optimum learning gains. This theory holds that if students are taught from texts that are easier or harder than their “instructional level,” then less learning or no learning results. Accordingly, teachers have been taught not to give their students hard texts to read. But now the CCSS are requiring just that.

That this is disquieting is an understatement. It seems to be a violation of principle and a rejection of the research evidence that teachers have been admonished to follow. This is why teachers are so surprised to find that there is not really a firm base of research supporting the idea of matching kids to texts.<sup>10</sup> Despite the ubiquity of the practice, *research has found no consistent relationship of student-text match and learning.*<sup>11</sup> Despite the hard work of so many teachers to make certain that students are in the “just right” book, doing so does not appear to promote better learning.

It is not that student and text levels don't matter—they are certainly part of the learning equation—but so is the amount of support or scaffolding that teachers provide. Unfortunately, teacher preparation typically includes few tools for helping students to learn from challenging texts. No wonder teachers so often resort to reading the texts to students, using round-robin reading, or, in history or science, not using the textbook at all.

Under the CCSS, students will be more frustrated by challenging texts, and this means other instructional supports will be needed to help and encourage them along this path. Teachers must learn to anticipate text challenges and how to support students to allow them to negotiate texts successfully, but without doing the work for them. Look, for example, at the fifth-grade science passage in Table 2 (on the left); a text like this, previously, would have appeared in a sixth- or even seventh-grade textbook, but will be served up to 10-year-olds under the CCSS. A major challenge posed by this passage is that it is difficult to get all the ideas connected properly into an explanatory chain.<sup>12</sup> For example, the word “it” is used repeatedly throughout this paragraph, sometimes referring to the nebula, sometimes to the protoplanetary disk, and sometimes to the sun's gravity. Guiding students to make the right links and to weave these chains of meaning together can help them make sense of the text without just telling them what it says.

Similar supports can help students interpret sophisticated vocabulary or

**Table 2** Guidance to Help Students Make Sense of a Challenging Text

### Challenging fifth-grade passage:

Meanwhile, the nebula continued to orbit the new Sun until it formed a large flat ring around it. Scientists call this ring a “protoplanetary disk.” The disk, or ring, was hottest where it was closest to the Sun, and coolest at its outer edge. As the disk swirled around the Sun, the Sun's gravity went to work. It pulled and tugged at the bits of rock, dust, ice, and gas until they came together in clumps of material we now call the planets.

SOURCE: ELAINE SCOTT, “WHEN IS A PLANET NOT A PLANET?,” IN *WONDERS*, GRADE 5 (NEW YORK: MCGRAW HILL: 2014), 407.

### Guidance to help students think about the ideas and their connections:

Meanwhile, the nebula continued to orbit the new Sun until it formed a large flat ring around it. Scientists call this ring a “protoplanetary disk.” The disk, or ring, was hottest where it was closest to the Sun, and coolest at its outer edge. As the disk swirled around the Sun, the Sun's gravity went to work. It pulled and tugged at the bits of rock, dust, ice, and gas until they came together in clumps of material we now call the planets.

literary devices, untangle the tortured syntax of complex sentences, or discern subtle organizational structures or bewildering authorial tones. Such instruction, however, looks less like traditional reading lessons and more like team problem-solving, with teachers offering guidance and support, and the children reading and rereading to figure out the meaning.

### Preparing to Read versus Actually Reading

Reading lessons have not actually started with reading for a very long time. Instead, such lessons usually prepare students to think about the text they are working on *prior* to reading, and such preparation can take substantial classroom time. Reading preparation includes discussions of relevant background information, explanations of context in which the text was produced, previews or overviews of the text itself, “picture walks,” predictions, and purpose-setting.

Common Core proponents espouse a less thorough regime of reading preparation.<sup>13</sup> The explanation of why the CCSS are taking on this sacred cow goes back centuries and has much to do with arguments over the nature of reading itself. The anti-reading-preparation stance can be traced all the way back to the Protestant Reformation. One of Martin Luther’s basic tenets was that ordinary

laypeople could read the Bible themselves, without an intermediary priest to interpret for them. Four hundred years later, the same argument divided English departments: Could students read literature without the explanations and interpretations of their professors? The result was the “New Criticism,” and its advocates championed the idea of “close reading”: having students read and reread texts while paying close attention to the words and structure, with little reliance on other information.<sup>14</sup> The New Critics believed mean-

ing resided not in the context or author’s intentions that produced it, but in the words the author used to give expression.<sup>15</sup> Exit considerations of the author’s biographical details or the teacher’s interpretations of the text; enter an intensive focus on the texts themselves—not just on what a text had to say, but how it worked—how the author’s words or structures aligned with the meaning. Basically, texts were viewed as complete unto themselves, without need for additional information about the author or opinions from other people or texts. As such, they were coherent representations of meaning and craft that students could make sense of if taught what to pay attention to and given an opportunity to analyze the text—and the text alone—carefully.<sup>16</sup>

This sparser view of reading preparation conflicts with the daily reading ritual found in most US classrooms. Instead of guiding students to read texts closely, such lessons usually provide a veritable flood of extra information—previews, explanations, and reading purposes, along with analysis of relevant context or background

information and the like. If students are to read about tide pools, for example, teachers are counseled to start out by asking questions such as, “Have you ever visited a beach? What plants and animals did you see near the shore?” Or if students are to read *Charlotte’s Web*, they might first learn the biographical details of E. B. White’s life.

With so much of that preparation, the reading itself sometimes must be sacrificed; it is almost always attenuated. I recently observed a primary-grade reading lesson that included such a thorough and painstaking picture walk (previewing and discussing each illustration prior to reading) that eventually there was no reason for reading the eight-sentence story; there was no additional information to be learned.

“Close reading” sounds like a welcome idea that could push kids and teachers back into books. But there can be problems with such a scorched-earth approach to reading preparation, not the least of which is evidence from research suggesting that some such supports can actually improve comprehension. Such research seems particularly germane at a time when texts are supposed to get harder for kids.

If you ask most teachers the reason for all of the reading preparation, their most likely reply would be their students’ “lack of background” or “lack of prior knowledge.” What they mean is that their

kids don’t know very much about the topics to be read about, and that matters, because learning, to an extent, depends on what is already known.\* The great variation in academic background that students bring to school makes this issue particularly vexing for teachers. Cognitive psychology has defined reading comprehension in terms of a reader’s ability to integrate text information with prior knowledge to form a mental representation or memory.<sup>17</sup> Thus, “close reading” of a text for which one lacks the necessary background information

required to understand it may not be a very productive process for some learners. As a fairly thorough review of research on the role of prior knowledge in reading explained:<sup>18</sup>

Across all levels of age and ability, readers use their existing knowledge as a filter to interpret and construct meaning of a given text. They use this knowledge to determine importance, to draw inference, to elaborate text, and to monitor comprehension.

Extensive research into readers’ knowledge consistently finds that readers interpret texts through their background knowledge and that they store text information in their memories as if storing it in a filing cabinet, combining the new information into existing



\*For more on how reading comprehension depends on knowledge and vocabulary, see the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2006/index.cfm](http://www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2006/index.cfm).

files. While these findings are not at issue, current approaches to facilitating the use of prior knowledge in reading have calcified into rigid routines that may no longer be consistent with either research or our learning goals for students.

If a text presupposes some reader knowledge, providing such information ahead of time can facilitate comprehension.<sup>19</sup> For example, consider this old Henny Youngman joke: “Doctor, my leg hurts. What can I do?” The doctor says, “Limp!” The listener must recognize the reason someone tells a physician about a bum leg is to get advice on how to alleviate the problem. The humor comes from the violation of expectations that occurs when this apocryphal doctor takes the question literally rather than as a request for assistance. If the audience knows why the man would ask his doctor such a question, the joke can work; without it, a



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“close reading” isn’t likely to get you there. Background knowledge is needed to bridge the gap, and providing such knowledge ahead of time can enhance understanding. That’s one point for pre-reading preparation.

Similarly, activating already existing prior knowledge—that is, getting students to think about what they already know about a topic—can be helpful, too. Thus, having students discuss a topic prior to reading can improve understanding<sup>20</sup> even when such a discussion does not offer any new information. Students can even be taught to conduct this kind of prior knowledge activation themselves.<sup>21</sup> But, research also suggests that activating prior knowledge does not always pay off; sometimes it can even backfire, such as when the readers’ knowledge conflicts with information in the text.<sup>22</sup> On balance, while the research offers a note of caution, this is another point in support of pre-reading preparation.

However, as useful as knowledge is in the interpretive process, pre-reading preparations have grown into something contradictory to good sense. Given how ubiquitous background reviewing has become, it is no wonder that teachers and publishers have slipped into a somewhat perfunctory and ritualistic use of these practices. Background preparation is provided not only when it is needed, such as when a text is particularly unfamiliar to students or when an author presupposes particular information that would aid comprehension, but almost always during these pre-reading preparations. Such background preparation may even be irrelevant to the comprehension challenges that students face. They are not likely to benefit much from visualizing E. B. White’s barn prior to reading *Charlotte’s Web*, since that won’t help them with the real challenge of making sense of the book, but they may benefit from background preparation on the big issues of friendship and loyalty, and on the notion of the life cycle and how we proceed as a species even after individual deaths.

Another point of concern should be the extent of the background preparation. In many studies in which activating prior knowledge was found to be beneficial, background knowledge was activated by nothing more than giving students the topic or a title for an article.<sup>23</sup> Given that readers use their prior knowledge, making it obvious to them what knowledge to use can be facilitating. But unlike in these studies, in many classrooms, reading lessons incorporate extensive reviews of background information—way more than is justified by actual research findings.

Of course, one person’s presupposed background information is another’s plot summary. One group of researchers<sup>24</sup> found that giving information ahead of time powerfully enhanced comprehension and recall. However, what they offered was an extensive preview that was repetitive of the text itself. Students were asked to discuss a theme-related topic prior to reading a story; they were also given a story synopsis and a description of the setting, each character was introduced and described, the author’s point of view was specified, and the plots were revealed up to the point of climax. It seems pretty obvious that students who received such previews answered more questions about the text than students who did not. Sometimes the questions could be answered from the preview itself, while in other cases students could use the previewed information to formulate logical inferences about the text, or, failing that, they could reduce their amount of reading effort by focusing attention on only the unknown information (“since I already know everything up to the resolution, I’ll read that and find out how it comes out”). Is this really a boon to reading comprehension, or is such preparation simply taking the place of reading? Think of it this way: Are teachers really going to follow kids through college and career—or even into their accountability exams—preparing them for each text they are to read?

Part of the point of the CCSS (and of “close reading”) is that text must play the central role in reading and cannot profitably be ignored. Students who are engaged in a discussion of the life cycle or of friendship prior to reading *Charlotte’s Web* likely have some advantage in grasping the ideas from that book more quickly or more certainly. But is that really the point of reading instruction: to make kids into quick but somewhat shallow recognizers and comprehenders? We need to remember that one can read a text more than once, and that the purpose of reading is to interpret the text based on the information on the page rather than from the pre-reading

activity initiated by the teacher. Unfortunately, previewing has devolved from a brief “look over” into telling students key information from the text before they get a chance to read it themselves. This deprives them of any opportunity to make sense of—or simply enjoy—the text without the teacher predigesting it for them.

The CCSS place the text—not the teacher—at the center of the students’ negotiation of text meaning. Accordingly, they want pre-reading rituals reduced. It is certainly okay for a teacher to provide a brief introduction to a text so that students have some idea of what they are being asked to read, what genre it is, and why they should read it: “Now we’ll read a play about a boy’s first day at school,” or “We’ve been reading about the Civil War, and this next chapter will tell us about the final stages of the war and how it was won.” Such previews are sufficient preparation, allowing students to activate any prior knowledge they may have. It is also acceptable to use such preparation to fill gaps in student knowledge: “We’re going to read about Antarctica, and the chapter will tell you a lot about it, but it doesn’t make it very clear where Antarctica is. Let’s find it on our map before we read about it.”

None of these examples would steal appreciable time from reading, and in none would the teacher provide much information in place of what the author is going to provide. Instead of preparing students so thoroughly that they confront no problems in understanding a text, briefer introductions simply get students started. Any interpretive problems that may ensue can be dealt with along the way.

How much background information is appropriate depends on the text. If students are to read a story set during the Civil War, but not much about the war is revealed in the text, there is nothing wrong with telling or reminding students when and where the war took place and what it was about. That, as research has shown, can help students interpret the text, and it is probably consistent with what the author expected of his or her reading audience. But telling this same information before reading a book that does teach readers about the Civil War is unreasonable because it gets between the text and the reader. This shift away from extensive and repetitive spoilers to a more pointed and strategic introduction should allow students to understand what is expected of them and to use their prior knowledge in making sense of the text.

### Discussion of Text versus Integrating Knowledge and Ideas

Then what? Usually, students read, teachers ask questions about what they have read, and students respond to these questions, sometimes even answering them. Many teachers would tell you these questions ensure that kids read the book. However, research suggests such questions can do more than that. Teachers’ questions can influence student reading comprehension by highlighting which information is most important. If, during a history reading lesson, the teacher asks about dates, students will, over time, become more vigilant about dates. Teachers’ questions serve as a training guide that shows students what information to pay attention to while reading. Studies also reveal that some questions generate deeper and more extensive thinking than others, and engaging in deeper thinking also promotes higher comprehension.<sup>25</sup>

Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy is probably the most widely known scheme for formulating such questions.<sup>26</sup> It arrays behaviors from simple to more complex, depending on the degree of difficulty or

the amount of intellectual demand. *Knowledge* is the lowest level in this taxonomy, and it refers to memory for facts, terms, or basic concepts. It is followed by *comprehension*, which requires a restatement of information into one’s own words, or organizing or interpreting the information, such as determining a main idea. Then comes *application*, the use of information in a new context; followed by *analysis*, in which one examines and breaks information down into its parts, makes inferences about relationships, and finds evidence to support generalizations; which is followed by *synthesis*, in which information is combined in new ways. Finally, at the highest level of demand is *evaluation*, the making of judgments to assess validity or quality.

Other questioning schemes for reading tend to be consistent with Bloom’s taxonomy.<sup>27</sup> They place recall of what a text explicitly says at the most basic level, followed by the logical inferencing that readers need to fill gaps or make connections implied by the author, to high-level evaluations or judgments about the information.

## The Common Core State Standards place the text—not the teacher—at the center of the students’ negotiation of text meaning.

The CCSS do not discuss levels of questions or levels of thinking this overtly, and yet they have their own considerations for question formulation. Thus, the Q&A follow-up to reading is not going away any time soon, while some very different questions are likely to be asked during reading lessons due to the CCSS.

The CCSS question-asking convention garnering the most attention so far has to do with the idea of “text-dependent questions.” This idea is drawn from testing and refers to whether students need to read the text to answer.<sup>28</sup> This is evaluated by giving students the test questions without the texts to determine if they can be answered correctly anyway. Given that the CCSS are plac-



ing the text at the center of reading in so many ways, it should not be surprising that they emphasize the idea of asking questions specifically about the text.

The problem with text dependency is that it is easy to ask questions that depend upon the text but are not very important within the universe created by that text. Table 3 (below) illustrates this with various text-dependent questions about well-known fairy tales. It would be impossible to answer any of these questions without knowing the texts—which accomplishes the text-dependency criterion—but only some of these questions would be worth asking. The point of the CCSS is to emphasize the text above all else in text discussions, not to turn such discussions into quiz-show trivia. Even a cursory examination of examples of so-called text-dependent questions on the Internet suggests that many educators are getting the first idea, but not the second.

Unlike with various question-asking taxonomies, memory questions in the CCSS are not necessarily low level, with evaluative ones automatically placed higher in the pecking order. The issue is initially one of relevance to the text, but once relevancy or dependency is satisfied, it is essential to recognize that not all relevant questions are equal. One can ask inconsequential questions about an experience: “Besides that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?”

How do you determine which questions are worth asking? The CCSS provide valuable guidance in the form of their organizational plan for reading. The reading standards are divided into three categories: key ideas and details, craft and structure, and the integration of knowledge and ideas.

This blueprint seems to harken back to an approach to “close reading” first espoused by two scholars in 1940.<sup>29</sup> They advocated the idea that great books be read multiple times, with each reading constituting a separate journey, and each of these journeys resolving different concerns. According to this approach, a first reading

would be about figuring out what a text says. If one were reading a story, then being able to describe the characters and their motivations and to retell the plot would be crucial, since those would usually represent the key ideas and important details of a story or novel. Similarly, if one were reading a science experiment, it would be important to understand the purpose of the experiment, the basic steps undertaken, and the results. The important reading issue here isn’t whether the author stated it explicitly, which would just require recognition or memory, or whether the idea was implied and required some kind of logical inference by the reader, but whether the information mattered in the context of the text.

What information will be important cannot be determined separately from the text; thus, if one follows question-asking schemes too carefully, trivial questions almost always result. For example, knowing why the dog is called “Old Yeller” in Fred Gibson’s book by the same name is not very important in the context of that book, since it is more a description of the dog than a true name. This is not to suggest names don’t ever matter. Knowing the names of the characters in *East of Eden* is essential, since some of those names are literary allusions connecting these char-

acters to those in Genesis. Asking about the names of the brothers Caleb and Aron would be placed very low in Bloom’s taxonomy and yet would be encouraged by the CCSS because of their centrality to the matter at hand, making deep sense of this text.

In many reading lessons, when students can retell the key ideas and details of a text and answer questions about it, teachers often declare victory and move on. But the CCSS advocate reading such texts yet again, this time to make sense of the workings of their craft and structure, or *how* the text said what it said. How did the author organize the information? What literary devices or data presentation devices were used, and what was their effect? Why did the author choose this word or that word? Were the meanings of key terms consistent or did they change with use across the text?

Such second readings may require a full rereading of the whole selection, but often no more than a series of targeted second looks at specific portions of the text—portions relevant to craft and structure—is sufficient. Thus, after the first round of reading *East of Eden*, the teacher may have established that the names of the brothers were Caleb and Aron, but now the teacher will start probing about the meaning of the name of the book: Is it a good name? Why or why not? What does it refer to? Has anyone heard of Eden in any other context? Are there any clues in the book that help you to make sense of that name? Eventually, such questions



**Table 3** Text-Dependent Questions

**Trivial**

- What color was Riding Hood’s hood?
- What was the name of the girl who visited the Three Bears?
- Where did Hansel and Gretel’s parents tell them to wait?
- What did the godmother turn into a coach?

**Important**

- Why did the fairy promise that the princess would one day prick her finger and die?
- How did the stepsisters and stepmother treat Cinderella? Give examples from the text.
- Why was it important that Cinderella lost her shoe?

will guide students to look for parallels between Cain and Abel, and Caleb and Aron. (It should be noted that the heavy emphasis on analyzing the language of the texts has not been common in states' standards prior to the CCSS.)

Again, not all questions about craft and structure are going to be important (nor are craft and structure considered to be higher-level considerations than key ideas and details). Craft and structure questions should matter to the interpretation of the text at hand. In one text, a title or a name or some other fact may serve as no more than a bit of description, while in another, these seemingly "low-level facts" might be essential to understanding how the text works. With history texts or rhetorical texts, like speeches or political tracts, analysis of word choices or even the inclusion of particular facts can be enough to allow the reader to determine an author's biases or point of view. In a science text, carefully tracing the author's chain of reasoning can help assess the evidence supporting a theory or uncover discrepancies or errors in logic.

With the information gleaned from the first two readings, the reader is now ready to go even deeper into integrating knowledge and ideas: What does this text mean? What was the author's point? What does it have to say about our lives or our world? How valid is it? How good is it? How does it connect to other texts (or to other experiences, videos, or experiments)? By waiting until we have achieved a deep understanding of a text—of what it says and how it works—we are finally in a good position to critically evaluate the text and to compare its ideas and approach with those of other texts.

Finally, for each of these readings, in answering any of the types of questions emphasized in the CCSS, students are expected to do more than provide answers. They are required to glean information from texts as evidence that supports and justifies the conclusions they draw and the connections they make. It is not enough to get the right answer; students must become adept at collecting and using information that they gain when reading the texts.

**C**ultural practices that initially accomplish functional purposes, through repetition and the fullness of time, often lose their functionality and become traditions that convey other meanings to those within the culture. Various factors have guided the reading lesson across the decades. Teachers have often tried to follow research in this regard, assigning students relatively easy materials to ensure adequate levels of comprehension, providing extensive previews and background information toward the same end, and monitoring student reading with questions calculated to be at a high intellectual level.

However, teachers have been misled as to the strength or direction of the research related to issues such as the importance of matching text difficulty levels with student reading levels. Accurate research findings have been stretched beyond their original scope in support of classroom practices never actually evaluated by research. For example, the research finding that activating background knowledge can improve reading comprehension under some circumstances has been transformed into the idea that background activation is needed before every reading and that such efforts must be extensive and continuous. Sometimes a research-supported view (e.g., the idea that questions eliciting higher-order thinking tend to build comprehension better than those aimed at memory alone) simply gets twisted in the application. If teachers, textbook publishers, and test makers decide that they need to ask

a particular type of question for *every* text, then, at least some of the time, such questions will be tangential to *particular* texts.

As practices are inadvertently transformed from functional purposes to symbolic rituals, one starts to wonder about larger cultural implications. With the reading lesson, the daily rituals increasingly have elbowed the text aside. Instead of serving to focus students' attention on making sense of each text within its own interpretative universe, the reading lesson has too often conveyed to students that reading is a ceremonial event to which the text is of only marginal importance. Thus, we mistakenly worry more about how well the text matches the student reading level than whether it is worth reading at all; we inappropriately tell students what a text says before they have a chance to read it themselves (thereby minimizing the demands of actual reading); and we regrettably ask questions that, although of high intellectual level, probe more into the reader's background experiences than into the text itself.

Perhaps the purpose of this ritual has somehow been to celebrate the students themselves—it is, after all, their reading levels, their background knowledge, and their experiences that seem to be of greatest import in these daily observances. Paradoxically, by putting the focus on students in this way, they too may be marginalized. Instead of emphasizing the ideas in texts, and empowering students to understand those ideas—what they are, how they are expressed, and what they mean—we have ritually kept students in a state of ignorance and helplessness. In a milieu in which everything of importance is told, where ideas can be gained without the hard currency of analytical and critical thought, where one's reach is never allowed to exceed one's grasp, and where all opinions are equal and there are no consequential facts upon which to make decisions, the individual's value is diminished. The most important fact about the Common Core State Standards may be that they are getting educators to rethink this ritual—and to move ideas, and thinking about ideas, back to the center of the reading curriculum. □

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## Center Stage

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