**Transitioning to the Common Core**

**By J. Lyn Cannaday**

For many teachers, the change to the Common Core represents a dramatic shift in thinking—a new way of approaching the teaching of texts that poses new challenges and new opportunities. Most change comes with both anxiety and discomfort. For students and teachers alike, moving to the Common Core is, as a colleague put it, like walking into a party where you don't know anyone. Yet, while you might initially feel uncomfortable looking around at the unfamiliar faces, each person at that party also represents a potential friend or mentor. These moments of apprehension can be a catalyst for awakening the educator within. Transitioning to the Common Core represents an opportunity for teachers to encounter anew the art of teaching.

In classrooms where students have never been asked to read challenging tasks or parse the meaning of these texts for themselves, the change will undoubtedly look particularly daunting. As teachers, we instinctively want students to enjoy learning. While the Common Core lends itself to a very deep level of pride and satisfaction for the student who has successfully navigated a text, the transition to the close reading model at the heart of the Standards may be difficult for some and a struggle for many. It may be the case that students have come to rely on teachers to provide the meaning of the text rather than demanding of themselves that they read—and re-read—until they make meaning out of the words on the page. As the teacher encourages independence, students’ first and second (and possibly even third) reaction may reflect frustration at not being given the answer: “I can't get it. Explain it to me!"

For many of us, it is uncomfortable to watch students struggle, but we also know that true learning emerges from wrestling with material that initially appears dense and difficult to understand. The tasks posed by the Standards are demanding of both the teacher and student, and tasks that are hard give rise to anxiety. As teachers, we need to overcome our own anxiety and focus on helping students learn to independently overcome their own; we know better than our students that the frustration they feel will only be temporary—a narrow gate through which they must pass if they are to truly grasp what it means to read and understand a text.

Adopting the Common Core close analytic reading approach in my own classroom was a struggle—but it was ultimately transformative. I watched my favorite Washington Irving story go from a one day lesson I had “down pat”—that included the well-meaning teacher providing all the analogies and pointing out all the significant lines—into a multi-day lesson filled with awkward silences and not-so-subtle requests for me to simply explain the story because it was too hard. However, after persevering through the discomfort and having faith in my students that once they stopped relying on me they would trust the text to give up its secrets, the class reached a tipping point. One group of students grasped the subtleties of a particularly funny line, and then another group saw the humor in Irving’s wordplay. The insights quickly cascaded after that: Student after student started seeing the meaning of the individual words and sentences and even whole paragraphs. Re-reading the text didn’t seem like a burden when they discovered that reading and re-reading kept leading them deeper into the meaning of Irving’s story.

While no two classes of students are ever alike, the student population in my classroom typifies the composition of the average urban school populated with a high number of dysfluent readers and included special education students. As teachers, we know these students are extraordinary—each in their own way—but that one of the only things they typically share in common is the challenge of grasping deeply what they read. It is these students that teachers are most concerned about when they contemplate the high bar set by the Standards, knowing as they do the holes too many of these students have in their reading backgrounds.

But what has struck me has been the eagerness with which these students—once they understood that I was no longer going to deliver the information that they had to learn—approached the challenge of learning on their own. It wasn’t easy, but my students worked through the anxiety of being at this new "party" of unfamiliar faces and emerged at the end of the process proud of their newfound abilities. How did I get my struggling students to join the party? Every teacher has a bag of tricks, but I discovered that my bag of tricks was pretty ineffective. Instead of using this or that well-worn technique, I needed to change my overall vision of how to spend time in my classroom in order to achieve alignment with the close reading expectations of the Common Core.

What I discovered was the importance of the gift of time. We need to give our students more time to understand the text and patiently guide them versus rushing along to the next text even if they didn’t grasp what they read. In my classroom, that translated to giving my students time to truly discuss and delve into the text. Not only do the Common Core Reading Standards give us permission to spend this sort of time with text, they actually demand it.

As teachers, we all know that many of our students can speak more eloquently than they can write, and they can listen with more accuracy and understanding than they can read. We should, therefore, play to these strengths in our students to support them while we address their weaknesses. For me, that meant presenting a question that required close reading on their part and then asking students in pairs, triples, or even in larger groups to go back, re-read the text, and then discuss in small groups the different possible answers they discovered in the text. I allowed them time to do all that before I held them fully accountable for their own position. I learned how to slow down and give my students the time they needed—time to form their answers and time to discuss the differences that emerged in the answers they arrived at versus those their neighbor discovered.

The initial silence I heard made me feel uncomfortable—especially when it stretched on and on after giving them a particularly challenging question—but higher level questions require more thought and *should* take more time. Teachers can take that time to circulate through the classroom and listen to those tentative first steps. They can offer gentle encouragement and a follow-up question to help move the conversation along. I discovered that my students ultimately felt empowered by learning not to turn to me as the repository of all knowledge and understanding, and that, in turn, empowered me to be more focused and deliberate in my own reading of the text and in the questions I posed to them.

Now, the questions posed in these exemplars of close analytic reading are quite good; they demand patience from teachers and patience on the part of students to truly answer them. But the time I gained by closely reading the text also empowered me to change a question or two based on the answers my students were giving. Like my students, I was reading the text through new eyes. I knew I was being true to the spirit of the exemplars because when I did modify the exemplar, I always made sure that the question was rooted in the text and that students could return to the text—*had* to return to the text—in order to answer it thoughtfully. For students with very little experience in this sort of reading or who lack confidence because of their past struggles with fluency, I found that asking questions in smaller grain size was helpful. When I started, there were times when my students honestly couldn't answer the questions—the questions I was posing were too complex to be understood on their own initially. I quickly learned to ask questions about smaller chunks of text—a paragraph or sentence or even a meaningful phrase—and that allowed students to orientate themselves. Starting off “slow and small” alerted students that it was time to turn on their "detecting" powers. It gave them a smaller task to succeed with and a sequence to lean on before answering the deeper and more difficult analytical and inferential questions that would be investigated later.

Transforming our classrooms to align with the Common Core may appear daunting, but the paybacks are tremendous. Give yourself the gift of time to make the switch—use these exemplars to start practicing and playing with the close analytic reading model. You’ll be surprised how quickly your students adapt to this approach once they know that you will still be there supporting them and listening to what they have to say. Indeed, when I overheard a special education student tell a fellow teacher that Marx was really hard to read and you had to read him over and over in order to understand his meaning, but that he was really interesting once you understood him—well, at that moment, I knew that whatever the challenge adopting the Common Core posed to my students and to me as a teacher, this party was the right place for both of us.