# How the Common Core Will Transform Reading Instruction

            In this important article in *American Educator*, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) says that although the Common Core State Standards clarify *what* students should know and be able to do at each grade level, not *how* it will be taught, “these standards will likely lead to the greatest changes in reading instruction seen for generations.” Here are the shifts that Shanahan foresees:

            • *Moving from ‘just right’ reading to close reading of challenging texts* – The previously accepted notion that students should be given texts at their “instructional level” led to classrooms with three reading groups and guided reading groups using leveled texts. “Despite the ubiquity of the practice,” says Shanahan, “*research has found no consistent relationship of student-text match and learning*. 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.” The focus on finding texts at the appropriate reading level may have eclipsed the bigger question of whether the texts were worth reading.

Common Core, on the other hand, specifies challenging text difficulty levels for each grade from 2 to 12, which will stretch many students beyond their instructional level. The problem is that some teachers don’t have a toolkit for helping students read challenging texts. They will have to learn how to help students read at higher levels – without doing the work for them. “Such instruction… looks less like traditional reading lessons and more like team problem-solving,” says Shanahan, “with teachers offering guidance and support, and the children reading and rereading to figure out the meaning.”

• *Moving from preparing to read to actually reading* – “Reading lessons have not actually started with reading for a very long time,” says Shanahan. “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 interpretive 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.” Common Core pushes teachers to dive into the texts much more quickly – treating them “as complete unto themselves, without need for additional information about the author or opinions from other people or texts.”

“This sparser view of reading preparation conflicts with the daily reading ritual found in most US classrooms,” Shanahan continues. “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… With so much of that preparation, the reading itself sometimes must be sacrificed; it is almost always attenuated.”

But don’t teachers need to supply missing background knowledge so students will understand what they’re reading? Yes, if it’s missing, says Shanahan. And teachers should also activate prior knowledge that students already possess. But often the pre-reading ritual goes into too much detail and takes away from reading the actual text. “Is this really a boon to reading comprehension, or is such preparation simply taking the place of reading?” he asks. “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?... 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 pre-reading activity initiated by the teacher… The CCSS place the text – not the teacher – at the center of the students’ negotiation of text meaning.”

A brief introduction should be enough, he says: *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* or *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.*

• *Moving from questions about the text to integrating knowledge and ideas* – In the traditional reading lesson, teachers quiz their students, and their questions act as a “training guide” on what students should be paying attention to when they read. “In many reading lessons,” says Shanahan, “when students can retell the key ideas and details of a text and answer questions about it, teachers often declare victory and move on.”

Common Core, on the other hand, emphasizes *text-dependent* questions – those that students can answer only by referring back to the text. But the danger is that text-dependent questions can be low-level: *What color was Riding Hood’s hood? What was the name of the girl who visited the Three Bears?* Common Core guards against a diet of trivial questions by suggesting students read texts several times and look at them at three levels: key ideas and details; craft and structure; and integrating knowledge and ideas: *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,” says Shanahan, “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.”

“With the information gleaned from the first two readings,” he continues, “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 – or 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.”

Shanahan concludes by returning to his indictment of the traditional reading lesson: “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.”

“Letting the Text Take Center Stage” by Timothy Shanahan in *American Educator*, Fall 2013 (Vol. 37, #3, p. 4-11, 43), <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2013/Shanahan.pdf>

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