Close Reading in the Urban Classroom: A Teacher's Introspection

Abstract

The purpose of this action research piece was to discuss my experience with teaching close reading in the urban classroom using autoethnographic methods. It explains ideas and challenges that I encountered when teaching close reading in conjunction with close reading strategies. I detail close reading strategies and explain how they can be used advantageously. The article closes with ideas on how I learned the importance of promoting student self-application of strategies, incorporating strategies so that they are not time consuming, differentiating strategies, and ultimately, the idea of promoting reading for enjoyment.

Introduction

"So, after we read this passage, we should apply a reading strategy, right?" I lost count of the number of times I was asked this question from inquiring seventh grade students who had become accustomed to applying a reading strategy after completing reading assignments. I taught English Language Arts in an urban middle school in the southeast United States, 89% African American, 8% Hispanic, 3% White, 1% other; 98% free and reduced lunch. And NO reading assignment was without a close reading task attached. Then one day, I had an epiphany concerning my experiences with teaching close reading, I noticed that I spent too much time on the strategies, I overused the strategies, over taught the strategies, relied too heavily on teacher-led instruction of the strategies, in fact, I slowly began encouraging *readicide* (Gallagher, 2010) an increasing less desire to read, within my students.

Many articles and books have been written about teaching reading, but none discuss teachers' errors in teaching close reading. This piece will provide my coming of age through

introspection in terms of teaching close reading. Throughout this piece, I reflect on and critically examine the basis for close reading strategies in the urban classroom, the purpose for close reading within my classroom, while explaining the case of urban settings, particularly my school site. Admittedly, the close reading strategies detailed in this article could work for any teacher with readers in any setting. I provide a literature review that includes a list of close reading strategies I found useful to improve my practices with a rationale for their implementation. I also suggest ideas to ensure that strategies are not overused, but instead aid in promoting the love of reading and independent, student-use of strategies. Lastly, I weave through my inquiry and self-reflection processes in order to improve the use of close reading strategies within my classroom.

Method

I employed autoethnographic methods for this piece. Autoethnography allows people to draw on their own experiences to understand a phenomenon or culture (Mendez, 2013). In this case, the phenomenon was the teaching of close reading in the context of my 7th grade, urban English classroom. The goal of the information that I present is to urge readers to reflect, empathize, and connect with real, honest experience described throughout (Mendez, 2013). I share my experience with honesty and ethically through critical reflection, brief descriptions of strategies, and analysis of said epiphanies. Self-reflective writing served as the main data source.

Essentially, I share my coming of age as a teacher of close reading to an underserved, marginalized group. Bochner and Ellis (1996) suggest that autoethnography "shows people in the process of figuring out what to do and what their struggles mean." Throughout this piece I share my process of figuring out what to do and how I overcame my struggles of teaching close reading. Autoethnography seemed to best fit this piece as it promotes the investigation of personal experience.

Literature Review

Close Reading

It is first important to establish the term *close reading*. Close reading means to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension of complex text (Boyles, 2014; Lehman & Roberts, 2014). This uncovering the layers of meaning is done through the use of strategies such as annotating and signposts, both of which will be explained further in the next section.

Within the tide of changes that resulted from the adoption of Common Core came the influx of the daily use of close reading, although close reading is not a new concept (Dollins, 2016). The phrase and idea of close reading has been around since the 1930s (Hinchman & Moore, 2013). However, the theoretical implications of it were not heavily studied. In fact, it was largely overlooked as it pertained to scholarly discourse and study. Recently, its resurgence found its way into state standards (Dollins, 2016). Present day Common Core State Standards (CCSS) call for a 70/30 blend of informational and literary texts with increasing complexity, answering text-dependent questions and providing textual evidence, writing after reading, and participating in multiple readings of a texts to ensure close reading (Hinchman & Moore, 2013; National Governors Association, 2010).

The Urban Setting and Close Reading

In this paper, urban will be defined as a school with higher rates of free/reduced lunch, higher rates of non-dominant students and underserved students within a metropolitan area. It is also important to note that the term urban is not a term used to denote African American children, but it is inclusive of Hispanic, Asian, and now more than ever, Caucasian students (Scott & Teale, 2009). Students within the urban classroom environment sometimes have more

expansive needs than those of non-urban settings. This is because within urban classrooms, it is more common to find students that are within varying degrees of reading levels, including significantly below grade level. For instance, in non-urban classrooms of twenty-five total students, one may find three students with perceived learning deficits; yet, in urban learning environments, twice that number may be found (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Causes of increased perceived learning deficits among students in these settings are many and varied. They include seeming lack of school resources, higher rates of students diagnosed with exceptionalities, higher rates of poverty, higher rates of linguistic diversity, and higher rates of student mobility (Kincheloe, 2010).

Nonetheless, the disparities are wide concerning the number of students with learning deficits within the urban setting compared to non-urban settings. This issue makes the teaching of close reading and close reading strategies even more imperative for students within these settings to provide a knowledge-base of strategies to use when reading complex text. Close reading and close reading strategies are also necessary in the urban setting to aid in students' reading comprehension and to ensure positive reading experiences for students.

Close Reading Strategies

Close reading strategies are great tools, essentially because of the purpose of close reading. Hinchman and Moore (2013) and Fisher and Frey (2014) suggested that students deserve strategies that aid in reading closely, especially pertaining to texts that are complex. They further argued that the strategies can be effective for intervention (Fisher & Frey, 2014). However, the instruction of close reading must be done in a manner that encourages students to gradually close read for comprehension and gives them a repertoire of strategies that they eventually use to self-monitor reading.

Close reading strategies are not new concepts in education. However, they are increasingly relied upon now more than ever before. Close reading strategies include concepts such as coding the text, signposts, annotating, 4 A's Text Protocol, and double entry journals, etc. It is imperative that teachers model the strategies before expecting students to begin to independently close read while self-monitoring (Aleccia, 2011; Cummins, 2013). Furthermore, instruction of such strategies should be carried out by a classroom teacher who demonstrates, models, or guides readers on their acquisition and use (Schumaker et al., 2006). The next few paragraphs will detail the five strategies listed above.

Coding the Text.

Coding the text incorporates a series of codes that students will use to identify a certain reaction the passage caused within them as they read. Teachers should use pre-taught symbols as codes (Zeleman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). A question mark may represent a question that the student had upon reading the text. Students then explain the question that they had concerning the text. They also explain the relevance of the code. Saccomano (2014) urged that "they should be looking for specific elements within the text and those elements will change depending on the task they are given" (p. 145).

Signposts.

In the book, *Notice and Note*, Beers and Probst (2012), introduced six signposts, which are ideas and concepts that the students noticed while reading fiction texts that caused them to stop, notice, and make note of important concepts. These six signposts that alert readers to significant moments within the text are *aha moments, tough questions, words of the wiser, again and again, memory moment,* and *contrasts and contradictions* (Beers & Probst, 2012). To

explain one, *contrasts and contradictions* is when a character in authentic literature behaves differently than what was expected based on their previous behavior. Students explain how characters behaved out of the ordinary, explain why the change may have taken place, and explain the importance of the change in behavior.

Because close reading fiction and non-fiction is different, the authors deemed it necessary to use different signposts for each genre. Beers and Probst (2016) introduced nonfiction signposts that serve a similar purpose but have different names and are used specifically for non-fiction texts. These five signposts are called c*ontrasts and contradictions, absolute and extreme language, numbers and stats, quoted words, and word gaps*. Non-fiction signposts are based off three broad questions: 1) what surprised me, 2) what does the author think I know, and 3) what challenged changed or confirmed what I already know? It is the understanding of these three questions that allows for close reading of non-fiction text. For instance, to use the quoted words signpost, students identify words quoted in the text from other authors and determine why the author deemed it important to quote those specific words. They should also ask themselves the three aforementioned questions to help understand the importance of the authors quoted text.

Annotating.

Annotating is a popular close reading strategy. When annotating text, students underline, highlight, and make notes to ensure engagement with and understanding of the text. The idea is that students "talk to the text." They write what goes through their mind as they read significant pieces of the text. This could also be done in the margins on sticky notes when students are not allowed to write in the books. Annotating pushes students to deeply engage with text by having them think critically about what they have read and to actually write the thoughts that come to their mind during reading (Wolfe, 2000).

Four A's Protocol.

The Four A's protocol is used for aiding students in engaging with the text, and there are four steps that must be followed in order to use it. The Four A's Text Protocol attempts to help students engage with the text by requiring them to argue a point made within the text, explain one thing they aspire to do after reading the text, name one thing they agree with in the text, and explain what assumptions are held by the author, hence the title *Four A's Text Protocol* (Gray, 2005). The Four A's Text Protocol is a less widely used and known strategy. However, it is a beneficial one because it forces several cognitive processes simultaneously. The Four A's Text Protocol ultimately promotes critical thinking about a text. Through the use of this strategy, students tend to be highly engaged. Most students are particularly fond of arguing against a point made in the text.

Double Entry Journal.

The double entry journal is when students are asked to read text, write down an excerpt of the text, and provide the page number. On the opposite side of the page, students write commentary/analysis about the text excerpt they initially wrote down. For instance, they explain the importance or key ideas surrounding their chosen excerpt. The purpose of this strategy is to make decisions about significant parts of the text. This strategy encourages students to make connections with text in the following manners: text-to-text, self-to-text, and text-to-world (McLaughlin & Allen, 2000). Students normally love to share commentary to see if there was a consensus on key ideas and connections when using this strategy.

Though this is not an exhaustive list of close reading strategies, the mentioned strategies were implemented in my classroom and were found to encourage deeper thinking about the text

to promote student engagement and active reading. See Table 1, which provides further details

on each strategy.

Table 1

Close Reading Strategies

Strategy	Why Instruct?	Best Uses
Coding the Text	Readers use a symbol to denote a thought, feeling, or attitude they had towards a text causing them to think deeper about the text.	May be used for fiction or nonfiction texts
Signposts	Readers will use a symbol to denote certain concepts in the text and explain their importance. Readers use a different set of signposts for each type of genre: nonfiction, or fiction.	Use fiction signposts for fiction texts and nonfiction signposts for nonfiction texts
Four A's Protocol	Readers engage with the text by arguing, discussing an assumption of the author, an aspiration, and agreements with the text.	Nonfiction texts
Annotating	Readers engage with text by marking, highlighting, and making notes about the text.	May be used for fiction or nonfiction texts
Double Entry Journal	Readers answer comprehension questions concerning the text on one side of the paper and on the opposite side provide commentary.	May be used for fiction or nonfiction texts. May be best suited for nonfiction texts

Reflections: Introspection and Practice

As mentioned earlier, at a certain point in my teaching career, I had an epiphany. One day

it dawned on me that my use of close reading strategies was ineffective for my overall purpose of

teaching them. I noticed that I was spending too much time on close reading strategies. Teaching close reading strategies was great for engaging the students in my urban classroom, and they were certainly relevant. However, I eventually learned that I should have ensured not to overuse strategies, as I found myself using close reading strategies after every reading assignment. My intentions were pure; however, I needed to ensure balance. I realized that I needed to gauge which texts lent themselves to close reading and to what extent. Too often I was even using closing reading strategies as a whole lesson to force comprehension instead of as "plans for constructing meaning" that should be used to aid comprehension (Eunice Kennedy Shriver, 2000, p. 4). I discovered that I should have ascertained which is more important: the comprehension level after using the strategies or the process of using the strategy. There are several other questions I began to ponder after this dawning moment to ensure that the close reading strategies were relevant and useful in my classroom. Other questions that I considered concerning my urban classroom are listed and explained within the next few sections.

Question 1

When should students practice close reading strategies on their own? I found that the application of reading strategies should not take place solely as a teacher-led concept. Students should at some point choose a strategy for a specific text, and apply the strategy showing their overall engagement and understanding. I learned to provide many experiences in the beginning of the school year for students to learn and apply different reading strategies. There should also be a gradual release of students using the strategies following the *I do, We do, Y'all do* explicit teaching method (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Saccomano, 2014). I came to realize that it is best to do this in a cyclical manner to provide the experience of the strategies repetitively and for students to maintain adequate understanding of the strategies and their purposes. Once students

begin to fully understand the strategies, they will be able to choose and apply them appropriately through self-monitoring.

Question 2

How to incorporate close reading strategies without overusing instructional time? Too often close reading strategies took up large portions of instruction time. There should be time set aside for teaching the strategies, giving the students a first encounter with them, and then revisiting them throughout the school year. Spiraling several strategies would give students multiple exposures and chances to apply the strategies. Gibbs (2014) suggested that spiraling curriculum is to provide a sequence of instruction, revisiting it while providing increased complexity. This same concept should be applied to close reading. It is the revisiting of it that provides students with repetitive practice in using the strategies. However, one should not spend so much time on teaching the strategies that it becomes mundane, expected, and rehearsed. Every two weeks seemed to work well. I found it more effective to introduce and teach the strategies with text of low complexity when first introducing the strategies and gradually increase text complexity or differentiate text complexity based on student need. If the initial text was difficult, the students would lose the desire to participate.

Question 3

When should students be able to independently employ these strategies? I began teaching the close reading strategies so that eventually students would begin to mentally apply them on their own. I found it more effective to do this by constantly altering, adjusting, modifying strategies. Then, formally and informally assessing until students were able to use the close reading strategies to read closely to construct meaning (Eunice Kennedy Shriver, 2008).

This is not to say that students become expert readers, but that they acquired a working understanding of when to apply the close reading strategies during the year. They began to self-monitor and become self-aware of their inadequacies concerning reading. This only happens when students are allowed many opportunities to apply the strategies with a variety of different texts, including culturally relevant texts.

Question 4

How to differentiate when all students do not need the same strategies? Because urban classrooms are normally saturated with students in varying reading levels (as was my class), differentiation is important. Though it is fair to challenge those with reading deficiencies, it is also unfair to hold back students who read at higher levels than those with lower reading levels. I learned to differentiate as often as possible for all students (Levy, 2008). I became aware that if I chose to use the same text for close reading for all readers, I should then choose different text-dependent questions for the different levels. It is understood that it may be difficult to choose several different texts at varying reading levels that are along the same theme or iterate the same skills; therefore, I occasionally created materials or even consulted with teachers of lower or higher grades to obtain materials.

Daily differentiation may sometimes seem unlikely due to minimal school resources, schedule conflicts, and possibly high rates of student absenteeism; nevertheless, I found it best to provide differentiation as often as possible. I learned that some students will benefit from certain strategies more than others. For instance, coding the text is a strategy that all levels may use. However, the Four A's Protocol may necessitate differentiation. Higher level students may be able to complete all Four A's without much assistance, but lower leveled students may need

sentence stems to help them toward completion. Also, I found that lower level students may be more successful at completing only two of the Four A's Protocol.

It is possible to differentiate all strategies. Lower-leveled students might only be assigned half of the signposts. Higher level students might be assigned to identify the key details for the double entry journal, while the lower level students might help to provide commentary. For annotating, higher level students might receive larger chunks.

Question 5

How to balance reading for enjoyment and close reading? As a part of my learning, I also realized that all books and passages of texts do not necessitate close reading. Students should be able to read for enjoyment, without having to close read or apply a strategy for every assigned reading. Students may be given the choice to read books within their Lexile levels. Even when students are assigned to read classics that are not necessarily on their grade levels, comprehension can be enhanced through discussions and probing.

Every student will not interpret the same meaning from text. Sometimes, close reading of texts still does not result in students getting the *right answer*. Students should not be constantly coerced to derive the literal meaning from text after every sitting of reading, which happens when they close read too often or even daily, a mistake I made in my classroom. This caused *readicide,* when students no longer enjoy reading or become reluctant to read (Gallagher, 2010). Students must still be able to think outside of the box concerning text and not constantly coerced to determine the "right" interpretation of a text. It is also important to incorporate urban literacies. Students should be provided opportunities where they are able to read and write for leisure about culturally relevant concepts (May, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2014). For instance,

texts drawn from popular culture could be used such as school appropriate scripts from shows they watch, speeches by popular figures with whom they are familiar, and authentic literature with characters that resonate with them. These culturally relevant ideas should contain concepts and themes that resemble their discourse communities. By employing these ideas, I learned that students are then more engaged and enthused about reading.

Question 6

How to encourage consideration of subjective text meaning instead of solely the literal meaning? I noticed that close reading innately seems to negate reading for pleasure. I noticed that when students are allowed to read books of their choice, without having to stop to explain or cite textual evidence several times in one sitting, they have the ability to engage more with the text and derive their own meaning. Being able to derive personal meaning, subjectively is an important skill that students still need to develop along with finding the *right answer*. Close reading inherently allows students to be able to see themselves, especially in culturally relevant text. Conversely, with the heavy onset of close reading, students read to find the correct answer, instead of reading to deduce a meaningful interpretation. I believe that the reading of culturally relevant and/or student chosen material is necessary so that urban students may relate while using interpretive, subjective thinking.

From Inquiry to Action

Close reading is "a habit that teachers cultivate" (Fisher & Frey, 2014, p. 277). True. Yet, I found that the use of close reading and strategies should be implemented in moderation. Throughout my experiences, I learned that every piece of text is not worthy of the application of a close reading strategy. I also learned to be mindful that at some point during the year, students

should be allowed to choose the close reading strategies for specific text through self-monitoring (Cummins, 2013). Close reading strategies are just that, STRATEGIES. They are a means of aiding students in the mastery of measurable literacy standards. The strategies themselves are not measurable, and therefore, should not take up excessive amounts of instruction time. The most important factor of close reading is that students READ. And, it is an added bonus when they see themselves in representative texts. Nevertheless, the focus should be on fostering a love of reading within the students and not necessarily the methods by which they arrive at the point of loving reading. Meanwhile, the goal should be to grow students to a place where they are not just close readers but independent close readers (Boyles, 2014). I'm happy to report that after finding balance in my practices surrounding close reading, students no longer begrudgingly read in class. In fact, I began to lose count of the number of times students inquired *"So, what's the next piece we're reading?"*

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