

Teaching through Text Sets

Research-Based Curriculum

Introduction

Whether their states have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), educators everywhere have been grappling with understanding how to ensure their students will be college and career ready. Let us examine the words of the CCSS which describe what the Standards seek to accomplish.

“Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. They reflectively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic. In short, students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression of language” (CCSS 2010b).

When students are immersed in a set of texts around a common theme, they will not only reach a deep understanding of the content provided by those texts, but will also learn and practice the English language arts skills—reading, writing, listening, speaking, and language—necessary to gain and communicate that learning (Cappiello and Dawes 2013). This is what is needed to prepare our students to be college and career ready—a curriculum that is integrated so that English language arts skills find their rightful place as the tools to gain and communicate deep content-area knowledge.

Teaching through Text Sets seeks to provide teachers with one approach to, and the materials for, accomplishing the goals set by the CCSS. The series provides sets of diverse texts—organized around common themes, topics, or concepts—with lesson plans to help students address complex texts. Thus, teachers will be able to assess not only the content area knowledge gained by students but also the English language arts skills used for communicating that knowledge.

Research

Text Sets

“A text set collection focuses on one concept or topic and can include multiple genres such as books, charts and maps, informational pamphlets, poetry and songs, photographs, nonfiction books, almanacs, or encyclopedias” (Read-Write-Think 2004, 1). These resources can be print or digital and provide an alternative to textbook-driven instruction, although a textbook can be part of a text set. “When teachers make the transition from textbook-only classrooms to multitext classrooms, the focus of study becomes concepts rather than the content of one particular book. Students gain both a broad perspective and an in-depth sense of the subject matter from reading many texts on the same topic” (Ivey 2002, 20).

In her blog, Lauren Freedman (2011) provides a compelling list of reasons for using text sets. She suggests that text sets support an inquiry model of learning that will do the following:

- ◆ lead to intertextual connections
- ◆ cause students to confront multiple perspectives
- ◆ provide visual elements, which reinforce and deepen concept understandings
- ◆ reinforce the interrelatedness of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking
- ◆ provide avenues for authentic assessment and evaluation

Freedman concludes that the goals of using text sets are threefold:

- ◆ to increase literacy development
- ◆ to develop content understanding
- ◆ to develop students that have the confidence, independence, metacognition, and stamina of proficient learners

Cappiello and Dawes (2013) state the focus of a unit of study is not the text set itself, but the common theme that holds the text set together.

Many authors agree that text sets are a viable way to begin to meet the goals of a twenty-first-century education as captured by the CCSS and local state standards.

Text Complexity

The CCSS have set end-of-grade reading level expectations, which increase in difficulty through the end of high school. This has become known as the *staircase of complexity*.

Text complexity is defined using a three-part model: quantitative, qualitative, and reader and task determinations. Quantitative measures include aspects such as word frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion. Qualitative measures include aspects such as structure, language conventionality and clarity, knowledge demands, and levels of meaning or purpose. Reader and task determinations are the prime responsibility of teachers. It is the teacher who determines whether a text is appropriate for a particular student at a particular point in time (CCSS 2012).

While the difficulty of the reading required in college and career settings has steadily increased over time, the difficulty of the texts students are reading in K–12 classrooms has steadily decreased (CCSS 2010b). A study done by ACT, Inc. determined that the factor separating those who achieved a benchmark score or better on their test from those who fell below the benchmark was their “ability to answer questions associated with complex texts” (CCSS 2010b, 2). Simply put, “We have to care about the complexity levels of texts we use because ultimately we want our students to be prepared for the difficulty of the texts they will read in college and in their careers” (Hank 2012, 2).

Close Reading

Douglas Fisher (2012, interview) has defined *close reading*: “It’s a careful and purposeful rereading of a text. It’s an encounter with the text where students really focus on what the author has to say, what the author’s purpose was, what the words mean, and what the structure of the text tells us.” He also points out how these focuses align with what research tells us about teaching reading. However, those reading skills are not to be taught in isolation, but in the context of the texts being used in a unit of study (Fisher, n.d.). Fisher goes on to say, “In a close reading, we...give [students]...text-dependent questions that require that they go back into the text to look for answers.”...“text-dependent questions require students to read carefully and produce evidence in their verbal and written responses.”

Text-Dependent Questions

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2012b, 3) suggest that there are at least six categories of question types that can help students “move from explicit to implicit meaning and from sentence level to whole text and across multiple texts.”

- ◆ General understanding
- ◆ Key details
- ◆ Vocabulary and text structure
- ◆ Author’s purpose
- ◆ Inferences
- ◆ Opinions, arguments, and intertextual connections

In elementary classrooms, short passages that are worth reading should be used for close readings that are guided by the teacher. The lessons should be designed with a different purpose for each rereading. Students need to learn to question, mark words and passages of note, and take notes while doing these close readings. They should engage in rich discussions with the teacher and their classmates around the content of the text. This helps students learn and practice speaking, listening, and language skills that show that they truly understand a text (Fisher, n.d.). And, finally, students should be engaged in projects that require them to use writing in some form to communicate their learning.

Examples of Text-Dependent Questions

General Understanding

- What is the main idea of this text?
- What type of text is this?

Key Details

- What happened after _____?
- Why did the character _____?

Vocabulary and Text Structure

- What word means the same thing as _____?
- What text structure did the author use?

Author’s Purpose

- Why did the author write _____?
- Why did the author use the word _____ instead of _____?

Inferences

- How do you know _____?
- What can we infer about _____ given that _____?

Opinions, Arguments, and Intertextual Connections

- What evidence from the text supports your opinion?
- How is this text like _____?

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