Text-Based Questioning to Support Student Attainment of the CCSS

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Abstract

What are text-based questions? How might these be used to support student attainment of knowledge and reasoning skills required by the CCSS? Loh-Hagan and Bickel provide rationales and tips for generating text-based questions aligned to CCSS principles. Through pedagogical approaches and/or moves such as Questioning the Author (QtA), close reading, and constructing the gist, the authors seek to create equitable learning environments through the development of effective questions that give all students access to content and textual knowledge.

As demonstrated by performance from several pre-service teachers in graduate education programs, there seems to be some evidence of grappling with creating questions that foster deep student thinking around texts. Common mistakes that are made include creating questions:

- that are centered on personal experiences.

- that are closed-ended.

- that are leading.

- that are limited in terms of asking for textual evidence.

- that are limited in terms of cognitive demand, i.e., pushing for higher order thinking skills.

Essentially, these types of questions do not honor the intellectual capacity of students nor do they build deep understandings around texts and hence, do not increase content knowledge. Appleman (2009) writes, "Because the manner of our inquiry determines the ways in which we create meaning, we need to think clearly about the questions we ask about literary works" (p. 89). It is important for teachers to be able to ask the "right" kinds of questions linked to purpose in order to get the "right" kinds of answers from students, the type of answers that can lead to robust learning.

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The ability to interpret and analyze texts is a major requirement of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in which students are asked to examine both the author's messages and the author's methods. As such, teachers need to be able to ask effective questions within and across texts, questions that elicit students' evidence-based reasoning skills. Providing complex texts is not enough; teachers are also responsible for creating supportive learning environments around these texts. Moller and Allen (2000) recognize the importance of texts serving as catalysts but emphasize the teacher's role in encouraging and supporting students in their understanding and engagement of complex texts. Thus, text-based questioning is an essential skill set for teachers in the age of the CCSS since it is through text-based questioning that we level the playing field so that all students can be successful and gain both knowledge and skills. When we ask robust questions that require reasoning based on evidence in the text, we ensure that even those students who may not have privileged experiences outside school can be successful in meeting the high standards embodied in the CCSS.

Text-based questioning should play an integral part of "close reading," which is a mainstay of the CCSS. Shanahan (2012) makes the point that close reading is not a teaching strategy; it is "an intensive analysis of a text in order to come to terms with what it says, how it says it and what it means." While this sounds straightforward, many teachers still have difficulty understanding how to translate this into effective action.

Close reading of worthy complex texts, often requires that students read texts or portions of texts multiple times for different purposes. The questions a teacher asks on each of these successive readings will differ depending on purpose, but they can all require thinking on the part of students. For example, on a first reading, students will need to construct the gist; on a second reading, they might study the craft methods used to develop the text, e.g., study the language used in

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particular sentences; on a third reading, they might interpret the symbolism or compare characters in a literary text, or compare information in one text to that in another text, etc.

On a first reading, the goal should be constructing a basic understanding of the key ideas of the text. For a literary text, this will include the basic plot elements (Who are the characters? What is the setting? What is the problem? How is it solved?). For informational texts, this will include understanding the purpose of the piece and its central ideas and perhaps a few supporting details. While the CCSS require that we move to much higher levels of analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of texts, we should not minimize the work that is required to "construct" the gist in this first reading. The questions we use to assist students to construct this "gist" level of understanding might include some questions that are of lower cognitive demand, but they must be text-based.

Teachers often misunderstand the mental work involved in "constructing the gist." Developing a mental representation of a text (Kintsch, 1998) requires paying attention to important details, ignoring other information, holding in memory information from earlier in the text and linking it to information received later on

in the text. It may require inferring the meaning of words not heard before, understanding the referent of pronouns, and attending to which character is talking – to name just a few challenges. When teachers "test" comprehension (rather than supporting or developing it) by asking only closed-ended questions and accepting the "right" answer of one child and moving on, they often leave many students behind.

One of the purposes of this article is to highlight the Questioning the Author (QtA) approach to text discussion as an effective approach for building textual knowledge and engaging in close reading. Beck and McKeown's work on Text Talk (2001) and Questioning the Author (2006) offer approaches that assist teachers to assist students to "construct" a text-based model of the text through discussion. By engaging students in discourse about the text read-aloud and stopping at challenging portions to reread and ask questions such as "What's going on? What just happened? How does that fit with what we heard earlier?" that require students to process and explain, this approach models for students the kind of thinking they need to engage in when reading independently, (on a first reading). When implemented effectively, approaches such as these provide even our

early and struggling readers the opportunity to practice processing decontextualized text, thus using language (both listening and speaking) to learn.

QtA is important because it gives everyone access to the text. By conducting a whole-group instructional read-aloud, with discussion along the way—and not waiting until the end, teachers can ensure that all students receive the same information about the text. Also, teachers can help elicit appropriate student responses by asking questions like, "What makes you think that?" and thereby surfacing the thinking and allowing opportunities for agreement or respectful disagreement. They also model close reading skills such as re-reading, stopping and reflecting, thinking back, knitting together important details, etc. Approaches such as Text Talk and QtA are effective in that the focus is on eliciting responses from students that require them to use the text and to use their evidence-based reasoning skills. That stated, the QtA approach relies on teachers asking effective questions.

In an attempt to address some of the common mistakes in question-construction presented in the first paragraph, the following are "tips" for creating the types of questions that promote and encourage deep understandings and dialogues around texts.

QUESTIONS SHOULD BE CENTERED ON THE TEXT AND NOT ON PERSONAL RESPONSES.

Too often, teachers focus questions on eliciting personal experiences and evaluative judgments from the students. For example, questions that begin with "Have you ever…?" or "Did you like…?" are problematic because they do not build reasoning skills nor do they even require students to have read the text. Lewis (2000) claims that teachers have implemented a misguided and misinformed approach to reader response, one that "emphasizes the personal at the expense of the social and political" (p. 254) and that we need to "move beyond evocation to interpretation, a skill that can only result from an understanding of the codes and conventions of literary texts" (p. 256). Rosenblatt (1985) writes, "…it should be recognized that an overemphasis on personality moves the discussion out of the realm of a primary concern from the literary transaction and the teaching of literature" (p. 36). Text-to-self connections draw students away from the actual text and privilege personal stories which cannot be opposed or argued against thus ending any further inquiry or exploration.

Teachers often allow students to share personal connections with the intention of building background and/or providing all students access. Because the connections are based on each individual, the advantages of gaining background and access are limited in that only one person truly benefits. Instead of having students make text-to-self connections, teachers should be focusing on questions that are centered on the text. For instance, significance questions allow all students to participate and also require students to have read the text; these tasks ask students to locate significant moments in a text and then explain why those moments are significant to the text (McConachie & Petrosky, 2010).

THE VAST MAJORITY OF QUESTIONS SHOULD BE OPEN-ENDED.

Open-ended questions allow for multiple and varied responses. Responses are correct as long as they are

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based on evidence from the text and adhere to a relevant line of argument; as such, the responses are both accountable to accurate knowledge and accountable to rigorous thinking (Michaels, O'Connor & Hall with Resnick, 2010).

Questions beginning with "Do/can you…?" are problematic because the answers are either "yes" or "no." Questions beginning with "What is…?" may surface important details and can provide a platform for going much further. However, if a majority of questions are at this level, students will be severely short-changed. Graham (1985) suggested that students need questions that carefully guide their discussions of texts, not questions that "direct students toward a single approved reading"; the emphasis is on inviting them "to examine their otherwise unchallenged assumptions" (p. 165). Even though these "What is…?" questions may not elicit answers that are open to debate, they can uncover important misunderstandings about essential details that might need to be established before higher or deeper levels of comprehension can be attained. That stated, effective questions require students to, eventually, produce a defendable argument, which can be disputed.

Some teachers have expressed concerns about having open-ended questions that do not lead to a correct answer; this is a reality in that multiple-choice standardized tests require students to choose a correct answer. One way to address this might be to teach students that there is a dominant response that is more obvious than other responses. If we teach students how to reason, then they can apply these skills to effectively perform on multiple-choice tests by reasoning through a process of elimination.

A common misconception about asking open-ended questions is that any answer will be acceptable. This is not the case. For a discussion to lead to joint comprehension of the central ideas of a text, it is essential for teachers to decide in advance the range of text-based answers or ideas that will constitute an appropriate response. It is only with this type of advanced planning that the discussion can end with common understandings.

If the answer to the question can't be found in the text, is it worth asking?

QUESTIONS SHOULD MAKE STUDENTS DO THE WORK.

We need to make sure that we are not giving away the answers in our questions. Such leading questions do all the work for the students. In general, students are adept at giving teachers the types of responses they think teachers want to hear; if they are signaled toward a preferred position then they will take it without putting in any effort. Students get smarter by putting forth effort (Dweck, 2007); by doing the work for them, we deny them the opportunity to think.

QUESTIONS SHOULD REQUIRE STUDENTS TO LOOK FOR TEXTUAL EVIDENCE.

If the answer to the question can't be found in the text, is it worth asking? To extend on the criteria of questions needing to be text-based as described above, questions should make students go back to the text. Not only does this encourage strategic rereading, initiated by the student, but it also encourages students to build an evidence-based argument. Dressell (2005) writes, "Teachers need to insist that all readers provide support for their interpretations, either from the text or other relevant material" (p. 764). Dressell supports the notion of working across various texts, which could include classroom discussions, media, prior learning, etc.

Requiring students to refer to evidence from the text is as easy as asking follow-up questions such as "How do you know?" or "What makes you think so?" Students are required to build on a shared knowledge base and to produce new knowledge. This new knowledge takes the form of informed opinions that are supported by evidence. It is important to note that in the age of the CCSS, opinions are text-based arguments. The ability to effectively opine is a critical thinking skill.

QUESTIONS SHOULD ALSO PUSH FOR HIGHER LEVEL THINKING SUCH AS INTERPRETATION, ANALYSIS, SYNTHESIS, AND EVALUATION.

Teachers should be strategic and deliberate about when and how to use lower-order questions (who, what, when, where) versus higher-order questions (why, how). Lower-order questions are used to help students gain a basic comprehension of the text. These questions are necessary because students are only able to analyze and interpret once they have constructed the gist through an understanding of text details (Kucan & Pallinscar, 2013). These questions provide the foundation; however, some teachers do not move on to questions that push for interpretation and analysis. This is problematic because students are not given the opportunity to grow their thinking and push the boundaries of their understanding. Most of the students' time around a text should be on critical examinations versus basic comprehension.

Table 1: Tips for generating text-based questions using the text, *Paper Son: Lee's Journey to America* (James & Loh, 2013).*

TEXT-BASED QUESTIONING		
Criteria	**Non-Examples**	**Examples**
Questions should be centered on the text.	Have you ever lied?	Why did Lee lie about his citizenship status?
Questions should be open-ended.	Was Lee a paper son?	What does being a paper son mean to Lee?
Questions should make students do work.	Do you think Lee left China because he thought he would have more opportunities in the U.S.?	What were Lee's motivations for immigrating to the U.S.?
Questions should require students to look for textual evidence.	How far is it from Canton to Hong Kong? (Answer is not in the book or relevant to the story's main messages.)	What did Lee have to endure at Angel Island? How do you know?
Questions should also push for higher level thinking such as interpretation, analysis, synthesis and evaluation	What must life have been like in China for families to risk sending their children away? (This is a high level question that is not answered in this book. Further research required.)	How was Lee discriminated against at Angel Island? Was it worth it for him to leave his grandparents in China?

Lastly, to further refine this point, higher-level questions should not trump text-based questions; they are both important and need to be considered in relation to one another. In addition, teachers should not only understand the difference between text-based and not-text-based questioning, but they should also understand the difference between questions that push for lower cognitive demand versus higher cognitive demand. Cognitive demand is the intersection between content and process; cognitive demand addresses what students are supposed to do with the topical or conceptual knowledge that they learn (Niebling, Roach, Rahn-Blakeslee, 2008). For example, lower cognitive demand tasks are centered on memorization and recall; whereas, higher cognitive demand tasks are more centered on creating and innovating. By considering cognitive demand, teachers are being more strategic and deliberate about helping student truly understand complex texts.

Table 2 provides examples of questions sorted into lower and higher cognitive demand, that are also text-based and non-text-based. The CCSS require that teachers pay attention to both of these dimensions in planning for text discussions around worthy complex texts. While not requiring that teachers totally eliminate text-based questions that are of lower cognitive demand, nor totally eliminate higher level questions that go beyond the text, the CCSS asks teachers to have the preponderance of the work students do be both text-based and of high cognitive demand.

Table 2: Distinguishing text-based from non-text-based questions with lower and higher cognitive demand using the text, *Paper Son: Lee's Journey to America* (James & Loh, 2013).*

	Lower Cognitive Demand	Higher Cognitive Demand
Text-based	1. Name the main characters in *Paper Son*. (characters) 2. Identify the setting (time and place) in *Paper Son*. (setting) 3. What is the central problem in this story? Use information from the text to support your answer. (main idea) 4. What does Lee do to be successful in getting to America? (detail) 5. What genre of writing is *Paper Son*? (genre/historical fiction)	1. Why do you think the author titled this story *Paper Son*? (explanation with support) 2. It was very dangerous for Lee to travel to America to start a new life. Was it a good idea for PoPo and Gong Gong to send him to America? Use examples from the story to support your opinion. (opinion with support) 3. Does the author think the risks of coming to America to be a paper son were worth it? Use language from the text *Paper Son* to explain the author's point of view. (opinion with support) 4. Compare the character Lee in *Paper Son* to [another character in another book]? In what ways are they alike; how are they different? (comparing across texts) 5. Did Lee make a good decision when he decided to confide in Tai? Why or why not? Refer to details from the story when explaining your opinion. (opinion with support) 6. What features of *Paper Son* makes this an example of historical fiction? (features/genre) 7. What is the significance of the term Gum Saan in the text *Paper Son*? (explanation of symbolism) 8. What part of the story did you find most compelling & why? (evaluation with reasons) 9. Why couldn't Lee just buy a plane ticket and go to stay with his Uncle Fu? (historical perspective).
	Lower cognitive demand	Higher cognitive demand
Non-text-based	1. What craft element do the authors use to bring the voice of the characters alive? (dialogue) 2. What strategy did you use to figure out the meaning of the word "x"? (context clues)	1. Was Lee brave? (interpretation) 2. Describe a time when you acted brave. (personal connection) 3. Did you enjoy the story *Paper Son*? Why or why not? (opinion w/o text-based reasons) 4. What would you do in a situation like Lee's? Why? (interpretation)

In closing, the questions we ask (no matter how good) around any one text will only take us so far. The key to the rigor of the CCSS is the idea that we need to assist students (especially elementary students) to build knowledge. This can only happen by sustaining attention to a topic across multiple linked texts and by supporting students in the building of conceptual maps, academic vocabulary and networks of ideas. The next phase of implementation of the CCSS needs to move beyond providing single complex texts and doing close readings of them (idiosyncratically or arbitrarily); we need to be moving toward building coherent knowledge across grades through a systematically planned progression of topics across grades (Wattenberg, p. 31).

In other words, the CCSS are asking educators to tackle the challenge of building knowledge, beginning in the elementary grades. Ultimately, the purpose of education is to create independent readers, writers, and thinkers who can reason well; evidence-based reasoning skills are what make a person "college and career-ready." To step back, we need knowledge in order to reason; as such, it is imperative for teachers to learn how to ask effective text-based questions that help students to obtain knowledge and to reason with this knowledge.

TEST IT OUT!

Harris (2014) provides some examples for questioning that can be used in close reading. After reading our article, access the Harris article. The questions suggested in the Harris article include examples of the misconceptions we are trying to address. We challenge our readers to apply our criteria to her list of questions and to draw conclusions about

where they intersect and diverge. We also challenge you think about how you would change/improve the questions provided in Harris' article supported by the thinking in our article.

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*Please note: The Institute for Learning (IFL) offers The Institute for Learning (IFL) offers a 4th grade CCSS-aligned instructional unit of study entitled, "Analysis of Historical Fiction: PAPER SON. Please contact virginialoh@cs.com for more information.