“I see it as a crime scene”: Taking Close Reading Outside the Literature Classroom

Adhaar Noor Desai
Graduate Research and Teaching Fellow, 2012-2013
Department of English, Cornell University

Project Goals
- Theoretical
  - To better understand the transmission and reception of close reading as a disciplinary practice
  - To situate close reading within broader curricula in higher education
- Practical
  - To better communicate with students the usefulness, benefits, and translatability of close reading as a skill
  - To find ways to make students better close readers by allowing them to connect it to familiar ways of thinking external to the literary classroom
  - To compel students to engage in close reading as an intellectually stimulating and pleasurable exercise

What is close reading?
- The fundamental mode of analysis in a literature classroom
- Close reading originally began with the New Critics and focused attention to the stylistic and formal qualities of texts—tropes, schemes, figurative language, diction, syntax, structure.
- Now understood more as a habit of engaging not what the author says but how the author says it; still concerned with form, but also with ideology, philosophy, historical context, and material conditions of texts.

Methods
- Surveys were administered to 4 First-year Writing Seminar courses (FWS) and 1 upper-level English class; in total 52 FWS students and 10 upper-level students were surveyed
- Informal interviews with instructors accompanied surveys in order to provide context
- Surveys asked students 6 Likert-scale Questions and 5 open-ended questions regarding students’ confidence with close reading and their ability to identify skills associated with it.
- Surveys also asked students if they considered close reading similar to other activities
- Qualitative student responses were coded thematically
- Coded categories were compared in terms of scores on Likert-scale questions

Data and Analysis
- About half of the FWS students tended toward describing close reading as a “habit of engagement,” while the others spoke of it as tethered to apprehension of literary forms.
- Students conceiving of close reading in terms of problem solving were generally more confident and more able to recognize the translatability of the skill set
- Many of the FWS students who related close reading specifically to literary techniques also limited its applicability to the arts, while those thinking of it in terms of engagement connected it to things like “doing a math problem” or “looking for trends in data”

Perspectives on Close Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limited to Literary Analysis (n=30)</th>
<th>Habit of engagement (n=22)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have received enough instruction on how to close read</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident that I know how to engage in close reading</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructors have explained why close reading is useful and/or important</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I re-read texts that when I am performing close readings</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that I use skills involved in close reading in non-literary contexts</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I do close readings, I try to imitate the ways my teachers have done close readings in class</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Likert scale values: 1=“Strongly disagree,” 3=“Uncertain,” 5=“Strongly agree”

What do students understand close reading to be?
- Students’ responses could be roughly divided into two thematic categories based on how they answered the question, “Can you think of any activities that are similar to close reading?” Just under half of the students viewed close reading as a habit of engaging more generally, and a little over half explicitly aligned close reading with the analysis of artwork.

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Conclusions
- Students able to conceive of close reading as a habit of engagement— involving an “attention to detail,” an “ability to recognize patterns,” and a mindset of curiosity and problem-solving— may display a richer appreciation for close reading outside of the literature classroom.
- Assignments and lesson plans striving to frame close reading beyond apprehension of literary devices— activities encouraging interactivity and self-reflection— might help students become more confident close readers.

Promoting Engagement
- I was able to use feedback from these surveys in order to design a lesson plan with a colleague to employ in his FWS. We decided to connect close reading to interactivity and engagement by likening it to playing a game of Tic-Tac-Toe.
- Students formed into two teams, and justified their moves in writing, noting what assumptions they were making and what informed their thinking.
- Afterward, we undertook a group close reading of the first chapter of Thomas Pynchon’s “The Crying of Lot 59,” asking students to engage with the text with the same mindset they had articulated as operating during their Tic-Tac-Toe game.
- Student responses were largely positive:
  - “It was a nice change and it helped me to analyze the book in a different way”
  - “It was an interesting way at teaching us how to close read through relating it to an activity that we all knew and understood how to strategize.”

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