Shanahan on Literacy

***Friday, January 18, 2013***[**Q & A On All Things Common Core**](http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2013/01/recently-i-participated-in-webinar-for.html)

Recently, I participated in a webinar for McGraw-Hill about teaching with the common core standards. Participants sent in some questions and I have provided answers to those questions. Thought you might be interested in the wide-ranging conversation. Here is a link to the webinar itself in case you want to start there: <http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2012/11/mcgraw-hill-webinar.html>  
  
**Any suggestions as to how raising text levels will work for students that are learning English? Are the same ideas relevant?** I suspect that it isn’t that different across languages in terms of how this works generally or how well it will work. What needs to be scaffolded might differ, however. Usually second language learners will need more vocabulary support or grammar support than will be needed by native speakers (but there can be a lot of individual variation in this). Second language experts have long expressed concerns about text placements that under shot ELL students’ intellectual capacities; that problem will definitely be improved by this approach. For more info on English learners and common core visit <http://ell.stanford.edu/>  
 **With the huge emphasis on increased text level, it seems that the amount of reading done will decrease significantly. What are your thoughts on this?** That is a real possibility and it could be a problem. I think it is something we will need to be vigilant about. I continue to stress the idea that NOT all student reading needs to in the common core ranges and the importance of varied reading difficulty across the school day and school year. Obviously when one is dealing with very hard text, it makes sense to work with smaller doses of that (because it takes longer to figure it out)… with easier text the doses can be bigger. By working with a mix of texts, it is possible to get practice with both the intensity and extensiveness to increase student reading levels and reading stamina.  
  
**David Coleman suggests reading 50% informational and 50% literary text. When we present students with "reach" texts, would you suggest we put more informational than literary texts in their hands?** No, I generally wouldn’t say that, though in practice it might turn out that way. Kids will need experience in handling a wide variety of more challenging texts. However, I’ve been looking at the texts that elementary teachers report using with kids. The informational texts that they use tend to be harder than the literary texts… so if the harder texts that are available in your classroom are the informational texts, then these texts might very well be the ones that you use as reach texts.

**If the vast majority of students in a classroom is reading two grade levels below current grade level, and the teacher is exposing the students to grade level shared text, is this enough? Should the shared text be ABOVE current grade level in this case?** I don’t think there is a specific match of text to students (in terms of text difficulty) that facilitates learning. It will always be three variables: how well the student reads now, how hard the text is, and how much thoughtful support the teacher provides to help the student figure the text out. Working with materials two years harder than we would have used in the past is likely a sufficient distance to allow learning – now it is up to the teacher to provide enough support to encourage learning.  
  
**What would be the accuracy percentage you'd recommend when you suggest students read at their frustration level/"reach" level?** See previous question. There is no set level. William Powell’s work suggests that these accuracy percentages might vary by grade levels, but that they were often in the mid 80-percents for the students who made the greatest gains (which is much lower than we would have encouraged in the past).  
  
**What is the role of literary nonfiction?** If you want to prepare students to read well you should give them opportunities to work with a wide variety of text types—so they gain experience dealing with different language, text features, purposes, structures, etc. Literary nonfiction—essays, biographies, speeches, criticism—is wonderful and important. However, literature and non-literary informational text (science, history, etc.) are important, too. I fear that many schools will increase literary nonfiction, but will not increase the reading of non-literary informational text. (I also fear the pressure in some schools for the English Department to take on science and history reading—which makes no sense to me).  
  
**Can you put a percent on the maximum amount of time allowed for out-of-level reading?** No. We definitely don’t know what the best mix of challenging and less challenging might be.  
  
**Do these shifts also apply to early intervention reading programs in all grade levels?** Early intervention programs focus on learners in preschool, kindergarten, and grade one. I don’t think it would be a good idea to ramp text difficulty up for these students. Stay with the kinds of materials and student-text matches that we have traditionally used at these levels. (For later interventions, I like the idea of the highly skilled intervention teacher in an advantaged situation—smaller groups of children, for instance, working with harder text. Remember to learn from such text a lot more support is needed, so shifting to difficult text in the high support situation makes greater sense.  
  
**If this is true for grades 2-12, is it the role of grades K-1 to teach ALL students to the point of being on grade level expectations of CCSS?** Grades PreK-1 have a lot to accomplish. The reason why we don’t ramp up the difficulty level of texts is to ensure that students develop their beginning reading and writing skills (e.g., phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, comprehension). Let’s not try to hurry past that part of the process (by raising the texts levels), but let’s give kids he skills that will allow them to benefit from the more challenging texts they will face later.

**Using grade level texts (not a steady diet of out of level) is a big shift in thinking. As a literacy coach, how do I convince teachers that what we have been telling them to do is not the CCSS way anymore? I can feel a revolt coming on! However, it makes good sense to me. Are there studies there about how this shift impacts students' achievement?**   
  
Here are a couple of past blogs that provide this information.  
<http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2011/07/more-evidence-supporting-hard-text.html>  
<http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2011/08/rejecting-instructional-level-theory.html>

**I work in a small district in Cedar City Utah as a school literacy specialist. Our district does not even have a core reading program that it requires all schools to use. (I use to work in Granite School district in Salt Lake City) My teachers want new curriculum in order to teach these new standards. Any suggestions on how to get the district to realize that new material is a real need with new standards?**  
  
The Common Core is requiring the use of more challenging texts than has been common in the past. It is requiring substantially greater attention to informational text and literary non-fiction. It is requiring greater attention to connections across texts, and to the use of texts that have sufficient intellectual depth to support close readings. I can’t imagine schools reaching the common core without making changes to their texts (how big those changes will need to be will depend on what is in place now, of course).  
  
**I would like to ask Dr. Shanahan if the three read, first for key ideas/details, second for craft/structure, and third for integration of knowledge/ideas works for informational text as well as literary? AND Can you briefly describe what a close reading in science might look like?**  
  
Yes, attention to those three kinds of thinking makes sense with both kinds of reading though the specifics may differ a bit (a key idea in one type of text is not necessarily a key idea in another). Early on a close reading of science is not that different from other close readings, but as students move up through the grades – and science texts gets more specialized—it can look pretty different. However, the structure of close reading can be pretty similar even when some of the specifics change. Thus, initially, it is important that students be able to identify the main idea and key details. This means students have to learn to focus on the key scientific information that would allow them to summarize the text adequately (so far, not that different from literary reading, and yet what kind of information matters most differs even at this point—character motive is pretty important in literary reading, while material cause or causation without motive is essential to science). A deeper stab at reading science will then require attention to the nature of the author’s language and the structure of the text: this might include teaching students to understand the structure of an experiment or the kind of sentence-to-sentence analysis of text illustrated in Reading in Secondary Content Areas. Then to push even deeper, analyzing the connection among the parts of the text (such as the connections of the data-communication devices, tables and the like, to the prose) or comparing one scientific account with another.

**What are your thoughts about using gradated texts? Texts on a variety of levels as a scaffold?** I think reading multiple texts on a topic written at different levels of difficulty is a terrific scaffold for dealing with harder text. In the past, if a text was hard for students, reading teachers would have encouraged using a different text to be used “instead of.” The idea here is not to flee from the hard text, but to read some easier “in addition to” texts on the same topic and to climb these easier texts like stair-steps.  
  
**Where do learning disabled students fit with regard to these shifts?** I think teachers who work with these students may rely less on simply putting kids in easier texts as their response to these students’ needs, and more on trying to help them to deal with whatever they are struggling with.  
 **What recommendations do you have for getting a student, who may be reading 1-2 years below their grade level, to read at their grade level in the shortest amount of time?** I would make sure the student had about 3 hours per day of reading and writing work and this should engage the student in reading every day; reading something relatively easy and something challenging. The work with the challenging text needs guidance and support from a teacher with a lot of attention and explicit work on vocabulary. I would also argue for substantial fluency work (that could be with the same challenging text—repeated oral reading of some form or other). Depending on the age and skill level, I might push for explicit decoding instruction. I would encourage/require a lot of writing, too. Yes, it does, but what is a key idea in one kind of text may not be in another.