

Why Read-Alouds Matter More in the Age of the Common Core Standards

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For many educators, the term *read-aloud* conjures up warm, cozy, and nostalgic reminders of how teaching used to be—the days when we actually had time to read chapter books to children who sat mesmerized, wearing facial expressions that matched those of the characters in the book.

In this age of high-stakes testing, we've swapped the narrative read-aloud for more direct approaches to raising reading performance. Many people assumed that we could not easily measure the benefits of the read-aloud and that it probably wasn't very academic. Now, as the Common Core State Standards have been adopted by 45 states and three territories, many people may see the read-aloud as even more of a dispensable luxury. We'd like to pose an alternative view: *Read-alouds will matter even more in the age of the Common Core standards.*

Less Literature, More Nonfiction

The Common Core expectations focus on providing elementary children with equal access to narrative texts and informational texts. Although informational texts make up a small percentage of what we introduce in most elementary classrooms, the Common Core standards call for a significant shift of focus to 50 percent literature and 50 percent informational text (and the percentage of informational text increases as students get older). How different is that from what we currently do? When Nell Duke (2000) examined the use of informational texts in 20 1st-grade classrooms, she found that on average, children spent 3.6 minutes a day on informational texts, with urban schools spending 1.9 minutes a day on informational texts.

In light of this radical shift away from our current lopsided emphasis on narrative texts, protecting the read-aloud time may seem counterintuitive. After all, why would we want to use up valuable instructional time reading stories to our students? Our answer is simple. In addition to getting kids hooked on books, narrative read-alouds are an effortless way to help students acquire the academic language they will need to comprehend informational texts. When we give up the read-aloud, we may slow students' vocabulary learning; research has shown a strong positive correlation between read-aloud experiences and vocabulary development (Meehan, 1999; Roberts, 2008; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sharif, Ozuah, Dinkevich, & Mulvihill, 2003). A 20-minute read-aloud can repeatedly expose children to academic words that will likely show up in content textbooks. For example, such words as *somber*, *bespoke*, *probed*, *tolerance*, *substance*, *boring*, *searing*, *eliciting*, *surges*, and *anguish* are considered academic vocabulary. And they all appear in this paragraph from Brandon Mull's book, *Beyonders: Seeds of Rebellion*, marketed for 3rd to 6th graders. In this excerpt, a character named Nedwin describes his torture at the hands of the captors who placed him under the influence of a pain-enhancing substance.

Nedwin gave a bitter chuckle. His somber smile bespoke dark memories. 'Endlessly. They probed the limits of my tolerance. Under the influence of the substance, a finger pressed to my shoulder felt like it was boring into me, searing my flesh. But they wouldn't stop there. They would slap me, or cut me, eliciting overwhelming surges of anguish. Then they would drill my teeth' (p. 205).

Not only does a book like this bring students to the edge of their seats, but it also exposes them to noncontent-specific academic vocabulary in an enjoyable context. In addition, a teacher could tell whether or not students understood the excerpt by looking at their facial expressions and their subsequent wincing. Simple written journal

responses to story-specific prompts can also provide teachers with accountability and evidence regarding whether or not students understand what you're reading.

Now let's look at an example from an informational text. Consider the following excerpt from a 5th-grade history textbook introducing the growth of big business in the latter half of the 19th century.

The booming railroad industry spurred growth throughout the American economy. The railroad's demand for coal, iron, and wood boosted the mining and timber industries. Steel mills expanded as did factories producing rails, tires, and cars. As industries in the United States grew, farsighted business leaders found new ways to organize and control them. In the process, some became very rich (Viola, 1998, p. 594).

This excerpt makes up a small proportion of the section that would typically be assigned to 5th graders. The textbook provides its own highlighted new vocabulary terms like *capital*, *corporation*, *stockholders*, *dividends*, and *trust*. But none of those terms are found in this paragraph. To teach every noncontent-specific academic vocabulary word that appears in assigned sections of informational texts would leave little time for anything else. In most content textbooks, we can expect that noncontent-specific academic vocabulary will pose enough of a significant challenge as to disrupt comprehension of major portions of readings for typical 5th graders. This is particularly true for classrooms with English language learners. In fact, if we were to substitute the word *blah* for every word that might be unknown to a typical 5th grader, the same excerpt might actually read like this:

The booming railroad *blah blah* growth throughout the American *blah*. The railroad's demand for coal, iron, and wood boosted the mining and timber *blah*. Steel mills expanded as did factories producing rails, tires, and cars. As *blah* in the United States grew, *blah* business leaders found new ways to organize and control them. In the process, some became very rich.

Some students might substitute fewer *blahs*, but for others—including students who are not regularly reading or exposed to academic language outside of the classroom, English language learners, or students who come from families with lower income—the number of *blahs* might be even greater. The words likely to trip students up are noncontent-specific. They are fancy words that aren't typically spoken in everyday speech by children or their teachers. And because they are not content-specific, they are also not likely to be taught by content teachers. These are the words that we typically come across in narrative and informational text. If comprehension of content texts is the goal, then building noncontent-specific academic vocabulary needs to be part of our agenda.

The Key to Building Vocabulary

Carefully selected read-alouds can help us build students' banks of academic vocabulary. For example, when participating in read-alouds of books by authors such as Cornelia Funke, Kate DiCamillo, C. S. Lewis, and Roald Dahl, whose books tend to contain a wealth of academic vocabulary, children get immersed in oceans of sophisticated language. Although it is important to teach noncontent-specific academic vocabulary—particularly alongside strategies for deconstructing words and understanding how words are made—it is also important to realize that through read-alouds, you end up covering a lot more linguistic domain than you ever could by relying on assigned vocabulary lists. And, without realizing it, students repeatedly get introduced to noncontent-specific academic vocabulary words that are accurately pronounced and embedded within a context that has their attention. The more familiar students are with a word, the more likely they will have a good feeling for what that word means and the more effortlessly they will read that word when they come across it. For certain, they will come away with more than just *blah*.

Proper implementation of the Common Core State Standards will pose significant challenges for schools. Our fear is that implementation may lead schools to focus so heavily on the standards' stated goals that they'll overlook the significant initial steps that could support students in meeting these goals. A significant percentage of students, particularly English language learners, aren't able to make sense of these texts now. Why would we expect that without adequate scaffolding, they'd be able to meet our demands simply because we demand it with

the blessings of the United States Department of Education, the consensus of the Common Core standards, and the muscle of high-stakes state assessments? There is a major need to address the gap between our expectations and what our students will need to meet our expectations. Read-alouds are an indispensable activity that can help us meet more challenging academic goals by improving children's academic language in contexts that are painless and meaningful.

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