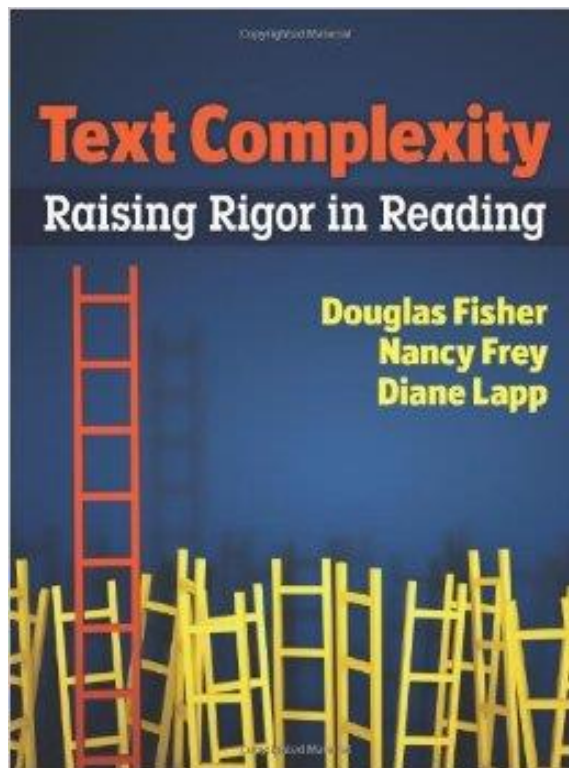


Review of Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading

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Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2012). *Text complexity: Raising rigor in reading*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

ISBN: 9780872074781

Pages: 212

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards, a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), by more than forty-five states and US territories, has brought the discussion of text complexity to the foreground of the conversation about what is taught in the classroom. The increase in the level of reading required by the Common Core has raised concerns about how exactly to implement the new expectations and how to support students as they interact with such rigorous texts. In *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading*, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp (2012) provide a thought-provoking discussion of how to identify an appropriately complex text for individual students and how to scaffold the reading of such a text to ensure that all students are successful in meeting the increase in cognitive demands required by the Common Core.

Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) begin with an overview of the components of text complexity, arguing that there are three components to text complexity—qualitative dimensions, quantitative dimensions, and reader and task considerations (p. 2-3). Chapter 1, Text Complexity is the New Black, provides readers with a discussion of how all three components are needed to provide insight into the success of a given text with a reader. They also argue that readability, “the ease of comprehension because of style writing” (Harris & Hodges, 1995, as cited in Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 3), impacts text complexity. The authors resist an easy definition, arguing that the style of a work and its intended audience impact the readability as much as quantitative measures, such as word length and sentence length. In this introductory chapter, the authors hint at the main issue surrounding the text complexity requirements of the Common Core Standards, which is how the more rigorous texts are used in classrooms. They argue that “more difficult texts with scaffolded instruction should become part of the classroom equation” (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 5), not simply assigning difficult texts for independent reading. They repeatedly make a case for struggle, arguing that “students should be provided with opportunities to struggle and to learn about

themselves as readers” (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 11).

The bulk of the book is devoted to fully explaining the multiple measures that can, and should, according to the authors, be used in determining a text’s complexity. In Chapter 2, Quantitative Measure of Text Complexity, the authors provide an overview of the various quantitative methods of determining text complexity; however, even at the beginning of the chapter, they caution that “To fully understand a text and its complexity, both [quantitative and qualitative] are needed” (p. 22). Educators will be familiar with many of the quantitative measures discussed in this chapter, such as the use of Lexile measures, but the explanation of each method’s limitations are worth reading. For example, while the Advantage-TASA Open Standard (ATOS) readability formula, used with Accelerated Reader software, measures the frequency of words within a text, providing a grade level suggestion for texts, the suggested grade level is often misleading. Using an excerpt from Suzanne Collins’ (2008) *The Hunger Games*, the authors argue that while the book receives a 5.3 grade level recommendation from Scholastic, the publisher recommends that the book be used with 7th and 8th grade students due to the content. The authors view other quantitative measures, such as the Fry Readability Graph, as a more accurate method for determining a text’s complexity than ones, such as the ATOS formula, that rely on word-level analysis. The Fry Readability Graph involves selecting three 100-word passages and counting “the number of sentences and syllables in each passage,” then averaging the number of sentences and the number of syllables (p. 26). These two averages are then plotted on the Fry Readability Graph to determine an approximate grade level. The authors argue that this method is relatively easy to use, though not as easy as computer-generated text levels, and seems to provide a slightly more accurate rating than the ATOS measurement. They caution readers that even with a quantitatively-calculated readability level, there are other factors that impact a student’s ease with a text, which they address in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 outlines the various qualities of texts that make them either “considerate texts” or inconsiderate ones (p. 42). A reader who has encountered a considerate text probably was not aware of the ways in which the text worked to help the reader—headings and subheadings, “signal words that convey the structure” (p. 43), text coherence, and reliance on readers’ background knowledge. The authors argue that inconsiderate texts are, by nature, more complex and require teachers to guide students through the processes of reading such a text. Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) provide readers with a “rubric for qualitatively analyzing narrative and informational texts” (p. 46). This chart addresses text features of purpose, narration, graphics, register, and many others, none of which are accounted for by the popular quantitative measurements. Educators will find Fisher, Frey, and Lapp’s chart helpful in making sense of the confusing world of text measurements. This chart, which allows an educator to rank a text on a scale of 1-3 in various categories, provides clear guidance as to how to judge the elusive qualitative measures of a text. For example, the authors ask educators to rate texts in categories such as organization, figurative language, narration, etc. The authors summarize their argument for multiple measures of text complexity with a quote from Hiebert (2011): “Once quantitative data establish that particular texts are ‘within the ballpark,’ the hard work of qualitative analyzing the demands of texts in relation to different readers and tasks begins” (as cited in Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 67).

Most difficult for readers wanting an easy answer to the question of text complexity is the authors’ argument in Chapter 4 that readers need to be matched to texts because “a reader’s transaction with the text becomes the place where meaning is created” (p. 77). While most educators would agree with this quote from Rosenblatt (2003), the actuality of practice is more often whole groups of students reading the same novel at the same time. The authors spend a good deal of time in Chapter 4 arguing against such as practice. They argue that individual factors, such as background knowledge, prior experiences, and motivation, can impact comprehension as much as the skill of the reader. The authors return in this chapter to their main

argument from Chapter 1: “If teachers want students to access more complex texts, teachers have to teach the texts” (p. 83). More specifically, teachers have to teach students how to access such difficult texts through modeling strategies for “comprehension, word solving, text structures, and text features” (p. 83). The authors provide a helpful chart that showcases examples of teacher modeling. For teachers who are unfamiliar with this practice, this chart provides a helpful resource, including both the teacher dialogue during the modeling process as well as the strategies used in those sessions.

The authors also explore the importance of questioning in guiding students’ comprehension of difficult texts. They make a solid argument against recall questions, choosing to focus instead on the emphasis in the Common Core State Standards on having “students to provide evidence from the text and justify their responses” (p. 95). This signals a major shift away from knowledge-based multiple choice questions where there is a single correct answer. For educators who have already begun working with the Common Core State Standards, this delineation of questioning, and the shift in emphasis, will not come as a surprise.

Chapter 5 attempts to make good on the promise of the subtitle of the text—Raising Rigor in Reading. While the majority of the book reads as an argument for multiple measures of text complexity, it is in the final chapter that the authors provide readers with suggestions for how to scaffold rigorous texts for students. The authors argue that close reading, which they describe as being a combination of New Criticism and reader response theory, is “what is required for critical literacy” (p. 107). In order for readers to achieve critical literacy, they must assume four roles: code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text critic (p. 107-108). Teachers can model these roles through the use of teacher-led, close reading exercises using short pieces of text. Here, the authors hit upon one of the pieces of confusion plaguing the Common Core State Standards—whether or not students should read entire texts. The authors are not suggesting here that students only read excerpts; rather, they are arguing for having students “read [a text] more than once” (p. 108).

Although this final chapter provides two examples of how to scaffold the reading of difficult texts, this final discussion feels incomplete. After such a lengthy discussion of the definition of text complexity, this final chapter feels almost like an afterthought. While the book holds promise, especially in terms of clarifying how to determine the complexity of a text for use in the classroom, a more detailed discussion of comprehension strategies would have made the book more useful for educators.

Overall, Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) provide a detailed discussion of how to define text complexity and the limitations of using a single measure in determining what text to use with students. They provide readers with easy-to-use charts and rubrics for better determining a text's match with specific readers. Teachers who are struggling with the increased rigor required by the Common Core State Standards will appreciate the authors' suggestions for using modeling and text-specific questions for scaffolding instruction.

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