***Ask the Independent Reading Experts!***

Dear Experts,

I recently invested a large sum of money into researching literacy in different content areas. I’ve been waiting for some results to verify the success of our initiative, but everyone involved seems to be ignoring my e-mails and phone calls. They’ve even unfriended me on Facebook. Any advice?

Central Office.

*Dear Office,*

*This is Brookline. We’re not really into results and data. We like anecdotes and nuance. We consider. We reconsider. We pledge to tinker. Come on over to the high school, and we’ll discuss our thoughts and feelings over some bagels.*

Dear Experts,

No, really. I need some statistics – stat.

Office.

*Dear Off,*

*Ok, we’re still compiling all the lies and damned lies. We’ll synthesize them into statistics by next week.*

Dear Experts,

I heard that you were interested in asking us students to read more independently, but wouldn’t it be better to standardize what we read, what we think and how we’re graded? That way we can all get A’s.

Depending On You To Get Into An Ivy.

*Dear Depends,*

*I see that you’ve been reading the Sagamore again. We’re sorry to hear that you’re depending on us, as we're more interested in independent readers than dependent ones. But even the very word, depends, is charged with so many meanings – so reliable in some contexts, so uncertain in others. Oh damn you, ambiguity. Damn you, fickle heart.*

Dear Experts,

We are worried that independent reading will soon replace the canon, dilute our culture and lead to the dissolution of families. If you allow students to choose what they want to read, they’ll never come to appreciate just how difficult, painful and wrenching reading really can be.

Brookline Citizens for a Better Brookline

*Dear Bro,*

*Canons are designed to explode. The Canon is Dead. Long Live the Canon.*

Dear Experts,

Why would we want to assign Independent Reading when we could just show videos?

Pushing when the Door Says Pull.

*Dear Apush,*

*You must be looking for the History CRI team. They’re in room 393.*

Dear Experts,

What if instead of independent reading, we just give students short, challenging, archaic passages to deconstruct? We could even make it timed, computerized and high-stakes!

Analysis Experts, D.C.

*Dear Anal,*

*We know that’s you, David Coleman. Leave us alone.*

Dear Experts,

We are concerned for our children. We want to find ways to connect with them, to engage and challenge them. We want them to value wonder as much as knowledge. We want to see them grow into imaginative, intelligent, empathetic, life-long learners. We want to ignore all the external pressures, all the public debates, and simply find ways to pass on our love of reading.

English Teachers Everywhere.

*Dear Colleagues,*

*We’ve been thinking about the same things. Bear with us as we share what we’ve been playing with – CRI.*

Okay, so we’re two years in, and we don’t really have any concrete answers.

But we have been thinking and experimenting and researching and conferring and tinkering, and we wanted to spend some time sharing our work and hearing your thoughts.

Two years ago, we joined CRI in order to explore the teaching of literacy across disciplines. The English team spent the first year unpacking our practice – researching various approaches to teaching reading, looking closely at our own instruction, assessing our assessments to see if they measured what we thought they measured, and meeting weekly to discuss the challenges we face in supporting, challenging and engaging students at all levels.

This year, we spent the first half of the year engaged in Action Research Projects – exploring different ways to access what our students truly comprehend when they read. And we have spent the second half of the year experimenting with different models of independent reading.

Here are a few of the Independent Reading models that what we’ve been playing with – how they work, what we’ve liked about them and problems that we’ve encountered.

**Some Good Looking Models:**

**Free Choice SSR**

**What it looks like:**

During class, students silently reading texts *of their own choice.* Sometimes the teacher reads alongside the students; sometimes the teacher circulates and/or holds conferences. Some teachers keep records via a log or simply have informal conversations. Range of reading time can vary from 20 minutes a week to 20 minutes each day.

**What we’ve liked:**

It ensures that students are actually… reading. It offers students a choice in what they read, helps them build fluency and stamina, creates a community of readers, and allows teachers an opportunity to develop personal relationships with students.

**Challenges we’ve encountered:**

Having students read during class means sacrificing instruction and discussion time. It can be hard to balance student conferences with classroom management, and it’s challenging to effectively measure progress in comprehension. Furthermore, it’s not clear whether increased free reading leads to improvement in reading whole class texts.

**Free Choice /Outside Reading**

**What it looks like:**

In addition to whole class texts, students choose an extra book (or more) to read per quarter. Sometimes books are suggested/encouraged/set aside for students from the teacher; sometimes students choose without set parameters. This reading happens outside of class; it’s done when there is extra time after the assigned homework, generally not discussed in class. Assessment options typically involve a creative project, reflection or reading conference.

**What we’ve liked:**

This model offers students independence and choice, allows them to choose books at their level, improves fluency and stamina, improves understanding of literary landscape, and asks students to comprehend without help of class.

**Challenges we’ve encountered:**

Students sometimes have a hard time finding time to read in their busy schedules. It can be hard to assign and grade meaningful/ worthwhile assessments. We don’t always know if kids are actually reading, or re-reading or gaining new content or skill building.

**Lit Circles**

**What it looks like:**

Students choose an independent reading book from a short list that the teacher provides. Sometimes this reading is the focus of the course, sometimes it is a book related to the whole class text. Students meet in book groups (in or out of class) to discuss the reading often with assigned roles.

**What we’ve liked:**

Gives students some freedom of choice but also makes sure that books are challenging and/or connected to course. This model shifts responsibility of comprehension onto students, creates student-centered classrooms, and asks students to hold each other accountable.

**Challenges we’ve encountered:**

This model shifts responsibility of comprehension onto students, creates student-centered classrooms, and asks students to hold each other accountable… and thus it can be hard to let go of control and let students flounder a bit as they discuss. Students sometimes have a hard time going beyond basic comprehension in small group discussions.

**Senior Paper Outside Reading**

**What it looks like:**

Students misread texts of their own choice then embark on a grueling, emotionally draining journey to complete essays while simultaneously reaching new nadirs of motivation.

**What we’ve liked:**

This model asks students to read challenging and complex texts and produce culminating essays that demonstrate the ability to thinking critically and independently. It prepares students for college level tasks, gives them freedom of choice but also provides a class structure to support them with the assignment.

**Challenges we’ve encountered:**

{Insert picture of Gaelen rocking in her safety space, saying, *kitty…? kitty…?*}

**Free Choice, Classroom Focus**

**What it looks like:**

The class focuses on essential skills, themes and/or questions, and students apply these to texts of their own choice. This might include studying short passages during class time to teach such things as narration or character development and then asking students to write about these concepts in books of their choosing. Or it might mean exploring essential questions as a class and asking students to read and write about books related to these questions.

**What we’ve liked:**

This model offers an approach to differentiated learning, allowing students to pursue their own interests while still feeling a part of collective inquiry, allows for greater connections across fields and disciplines and rich discussion of thematic questions, and empowers students to rely on peers for knowledge and growth.

**Challenges we’ve encountered:**

This model works better in some class frameworks than in others. It often requires a lot of frontloading prep work. Students need help developing essential questions and selecting appropriate texts.