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# Inspiring Curiosity and Enthusiasm for Nonfiction: A Project Designed to Boost Students' Will to Read

*The author describes a nine-week unit incorporating strategy instruction, guest speakers, and multimedia to engage struggling readers.*

In my role as supervisor to middle school and high school student teachers, I have observed dozens of students who avoid reading (or at least required school reading) at every turn. I have also known frustrated teachers, daunted by the challenge of getting student readers up to speed. In one teacher's words, referring to a resistant middle school student reading on a third-grade level, "Do I know what to do with a kid like him? I mean, how in the world?" We cannot surrender, however, to what Patrick F. Finn calls "domesticating," or soft education, instead of helping students to develop critical reading and thinking skills (xvi). To better encourage a desire in students to read, I set out to experiment with themes, texts, and activities to learn more about which practices spark students' curiosity and enthusiasm for reading, the drive to engage texts. Without developing a will to read, how will students develop—or sharpen—skill in reading?

Motivation is not about curricular frills; energizing students, keeping them engrossed in meaningful tasks, is essential. The literature shows that engaged readers outperform less-motivated peers on comprehension tests (Guthrie and Wigfield). At the heart of engaged reading, however, we usually find competence, a catch-22 for striving older readers. If students feel confident about their reading ability—in research jargon, if they have high *self-efficacy* (Bandura)—they are more likely to engage text. No surprise there: We willingly take part in activities we believe we can succeed at. That means the good readers keep reading, keep exposing themselves to print, and keep improving (Cunningham and Stanovich). But strugglers don't read much, if at all, and fall further and further behind competent peers, a phenomenon known as the Matthew Effect (Stanovich). How are teachers to get struggling students excited about reading if skill is a major drive for reading will?

There is no way around skill development, even if it incites yawns, but teachers can meet adolescent needs that can help win the motivation game. We know students want to feel an increasing sense of competence and control in the classroom (Ryan and Deci), to feel actively involved in the learning process, and to have a choice in what they read and write (Ivey and Broaddus). They need to feel meaningfully connected to others (Deci et al.)—a need often met by the great social conductor, technology. When students interact in positive ways with others, they enjoy a greater sense of belonging—another basic human need. They also crave relevant tasks that allow them to pursue genuine interests in a challenging (though not too taxing) environment (Miller) that grants them dignity and respect as human beings. A watered-down curriculum, after all, does not send a message of faith in students' abilities.

## A Homegrown Effort to Boost Reading Motivation and Engagement

There is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.

—*Henry L. Mencken, "The Divine Afflatus"*

This nine-week unit is complex, even messy, a combination of professional instincts, experience, and

knowledge of evidence-based practices. Ms. Adams, classroom teacher, Mrs. Hathaway, special education resource teacher, and I co-taught lessons to one seventh-grade class of students, reading, on average, one year below grade level. After agreeing on preliminary plans, we dove in, tweaking lessons on a daily basis as we negotiated our way toward our goal—improved reading motivation.

Given the importance of competence in the motivation equation, I could not ignore reading skill while designing a unit to rev up students about reading. Combined strategy instruction was thus woven into the plans, involving teacher modeling of, followed by guided small-group practice with, predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing text (modeled after Palincsar and Brown's "Reciprocal Teaching"). To help students build relevant background knowledge for unit readings, or mental Velcro to stick new knowledge to, I gathered a sequence of short, nonfiction texts (Smith and Wilhelm), rooted in unit concepts, including *(in)justice, survival, sacrifice, consequence, empathy, exploitation,* and *responsibility,* for use during whole-class strategy instruction.

We used strategy instruction to target comprehension skills and promote self-regulated reading (Reed et al.), and I designed a WebQuest to boost engagement and challenge students to explore, via diverse online nonfiction texts, themes of universal appeal to adolescents. The WebQuest challenged students to grapple with "The Use and Abuse of Power" by considering questions such as, "How and why do humans abuse their power to bully, threaten, or exploit others? What does it mean to be a responsible citizen? What can individuals, groups, or even countries do to protect the survival (and well-being) of humans and animals?" Students chose a research topic—either a population of at-risk children or an endangered animal—and set out to collect relevant facts, determine roots of exploitation or endangerment, and uncover ways humans might fight suffering and injustice in our world.

Though the WebQuest required students to digest online articles, blogs, photos, and video clips, offered reading and assignment choices, and encouraged peer collaboration, I worried student interest (and effort) might wane when all this reading became *hard.* I thus jumpstarted the unit by encouraging students to discover, through interactions with community members, reasons to value reading. If students believe reading *really matters,* they may work harder at developing strong(er) literacy skills.

I invited community members into the classroom to participate in three student-led group interviews. Our guests included a veterinarian, a collegiate basketball player, a collegiate soccer goalie, a movie producer, an editor, a businessman, a manager of rock bands, and a firefighter. The students' task was to generate as many answers as possible to a simple question: "Why read?"

Following this foundational activity, the students tackled a preliminary WebQuest task designed to familiarize them with online research and to engage the students' interest. Students chose five of 25 bizarre, animal-related statements from the WebQuest (such as "horned lizards can squirt blood from their eyes" or "some hummingbirds weigh less than a penny") and set off to confirm, or invalidate (and correct), the strange claims. To prevent inefficient Web surfing, students searched within a Portaportal site (http://www.portaportal.com), a bookmarking site that I used to create a list of relevant, appropriate links for students to use for their research. (See Figures 1 and 2 for examples.)

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As exciting as blood-squirting lizards can be, we soon pushed students beyond facts to deeper


Strange, Bizarre, & Amazing Animals

Hmm....Fact or Fiction?

You're about to research some of the weirdest animal facts out there.
Your job is to figure out which of these "facts" are true and which are not exactly correct.

Challenge #1: Choose at least 5 bizarre statements below. You'll find lots of useful information at www.portaportal.com (a mini Internet zone). Log on as a guest; type "jessicamatthews" as your guest username.

Tarsier, a tiny primitive primate

Work hard to become an expert in your 5 chosen animals or statements. If you discover an untrue statement, be ready to tell us why the statement is false!
Don't forget also to jot down other cool animal facts that you discover on your scavenger hunt.

Write your findings in the "bizarre animal facts" worksheet provided.

Ready? Here We Go....
Pick Your Favorite Five!

There was once a rodent (a rat-like animal) that could reach 1,600 pounds. That's as big as a buffalo! Find out if that's true at www.sciencenewsforkids.org/articles/20030924/Note2.asp

Some horned lizards can squirt blood from their eyes.

A cockroach can live for several weeks with its head cut off.
(How could this possibly be true? Get Readin' at www.portaportal.com!)

**FIGURE 1.** Bizarre trivia piqued students' curiosity and prompted purposeful reading.


**FIGURE 2.** The WebQuest allowed students to explore various pathways to knowledge.

conceptual understandings of the unit's big ideas. During each day's brief strategy lesson, we discussed questions of survival and justice, for example, as they pertained to the day's article. During the third week of the unit, students selected a topic they wished to pursue, alone or in pairs, in greater depth via the WebQuest. Some investigated the source of suffering among child soldiers in Uganda, as well as what other humans can do to protect them from a life of brutality and exploitation; other students wanted to find out how and why tigers are threatened, as well as what humans can or should do about their plight.

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## What Worked, for Whom, and under What Conditions?

We found that combining several instructional practices worked best to motivate the students to read, and I survey these combinations below. However, we also negotiated the delicate balance between instructional combinations and ever-shifting contextual variables (i.e., students' attitudes, interests, skills, and knowledge). For example, the combination of collaborative assignments and students with Asperger's syndrome, a condition often characterized by reclusive behavior, yielded oil-and-water effects, whereas the same challenge among students who craved social interaction worked well. Therefore the following combinations of practices require flexible, reflective teachers, willing to adapt ideas to meet the needs and interests of particular students.

### Combination 1: A Share in Classroom Control; Real-World, Hands-On Tasks; and Real-World Reasons to Read

We struck gold—serendipitous, infectious excitement—while *preparing* for our interview guests. In the classroom teacher's words, they were *pumped.* The prospect of interviewing a collegiate soccer player made Carlos, a quiet Hispanic student, bolt upright in his seat and exclaim, "Yes!" Elizabeth, a tall, confident student, called out, "Ooh! I want to be an actress!" when we shared that a movie producer would visit us. They all agreed it would be a good idea to practice interviewing skills before guests arrived. Since I was a classroom guest of sorts, as a teacher researcher, I suggested they interview me. To prepare, students spent approximately 15 minutes in small groups drafting questions. Framing the interview in a game format, we pitted girls against boys, with points earned for questions that elicited a 45-second response time, our attempt to prompt thinking around closed- versus open-ended questions. We invited several volunteers to take on leadership roles in the game: a note-taker to document all questions asked and their response times; a timekeeper; and host(s) to introduce me. We had far more volunteers than jobs.

When the interview began, students fired questions in machine-gun succession, hardly pausing to listen to answers or to generate response-based follow-up questions, so we paused the interview to model appropriate behaviors, highlighting active listening and reflecting critically on question quality. Many students relished the competitive edge to the game format, evidenced as smiles and pumped fists whenever a point was earned for asking an effective open-ended question. We also sensed that the interview process felt novel, interesting, and authentic to students—"real world." In one student's words, "It was kind of more interesting and complex and different from the usual stuff."

Students' curiosity and enthusiasm remained steady during the community-based group interviews. Pervasive engagement seemed rooted, at

least in part, in a democratic learning environment. Students in this class were used to sitting quietly in their desks, facing the front, listening to the teacher. The interview process put them at the center of meaning making. Initially, we invited students to introduce each of our guests, but again, we could not meet the demand for such jobs, so we found ourselves inventing opportunities on the spot, such as the "interview manager" who welcomed guests, called on students to ask questions, and kept track of time. Teachers observed from the sidelines.

When granted a little share in classroom power, students took their tasks seriously. I did not pester volunteers to gather information for their introductions. They sought me out. After granting Carlos's wish to introduce the athletes, he initiated contact with me twice over two days, first to request biographical information so he could prepare his brief introductions, and then to verify that I had not forgotten his role. When students like Carlos embraced the challenge, others followed, triggering a chain reaction of positive peer pressure. The following day, William, a basketball player, approached me before class to ask if he, too, could introduce a particular day's guests. In the end, the boys agreed to share the responsibility. The same day, Johnnie, whose modus operandi was to read vampire novels surreptitiously in class, if he was not staring blankly out the window, got wind of his peers' leadership roles and asked me, with furrowed brow, if he, too, could introduce somebody. During a post-unit interview, Ms. Adams said, "I think that getting them to do jobs made them feel really important." I agreed; they loved feeling in control of things.

The primary purpose, however, of these group interviews was to develop positive values, goals, and beliefs around reading (Guthrie and Wigfield)—to help students internalize the importance of strong reading skills. They did gather many answers to the question, "Why read?" though they were more interested in asking their own questions. In written reflections at the end of the interview week, prompted by a statistic—every school day, nearly 7,000 students drop out of high school ("About the Crisis")—students shared pragmatic reasons to read, even if several admitted they did not find reading enjoyable.

In an especially inspiring example, Matthew, who struggles with spelling as a result of dyslexia, composed sophisticated thoughts despite his linguistic challenges:

> Please! If you want to have a great life and work and make money. If you think reading and writeing is stodid [stupid] there are some reasons why you tropouts should go to school. Do you wont to now how people that cam not read or write have been scamed and heart [hurt] and when you sign up for a morgeage to be unsure weather you can trost any one? Becose if you don't get back in to high school and get back to reading you are going to have nothing for the rest of your life.

Following these interviews, we started on the WebQuest, continuing on our mission to uncover factors that boost students' reading motivation. Often we stumbled on insights, despite our efforts to "engineer" success. For example, though I suspected that carefully sequenced, short nonfiction texts would make a difference to striving readers, teacher-student rapport emerged as a more powerful force in engaging students to tackle substantive reading. It is impossible, however, to isolate a single variable—*the* golden thread in the web—of a successful activity. The following combination teases out the forces that contributed to sustained engagement with research projects.

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### Combination 2: Positive Relationships, Challenging Tasks, Opportunities to Interact, Choices, and a Chance to Make a Difference

"We seriously don't want you to go, Ms. Matthews. I mean seriously. Why do you have to go?" Students' handmade cards affirmed a root of our bond: a common awareness of, and concern for, social justice around the world. Lauren's parting message read, "I can't believe you're leaving I am going to miss you soooo very much! I never thought about other kids in different countries as much as I do now. Thanks, you already made the world a better place." Elizabeth wrote, "Here is some of our love to you. You were such a help to us. Keep on trying to get every-

one to understand the world is not a great place to some. We all can make a difference, and you make the world a better place. Never give up."

Several student pairs chose to research at-risk children in various parts of the world, including orphans, victims of war and poverty, child laborers, child soldiers, and even child victims of commercial sexual exploitation. As students browsed topics and websites on the first day of independent WebQuest work, I approached Elizabeth and Christie—a pair of popular girls usually focused on combing and retying their hair or slipping in illicit boy-talk during class—and I suggested they research a disturbing topic: the commercial sexual exploitation of girls. Assuring them it was their choice, I warned them the reading materials required maturity.

For the next five weeks, Elizabeth and Christie revealed numerous abilities: to empathize with young women around the world whom they had never met; to sustain engagement with their self-chosen issue and diverse texts; to collaborate with one another effectively; to acquire new vocabulary; and to record a public service announcement with the goal of raising awareness for exploited girls around the world. Perhaps flattered, and a little surprised, that teachers permitted them to research such a delicate, challenging subject, these girls tackled their task in earnest, as reflected in the following field note I took during their class:

> Yesterday Elizabeth and Christie worked with Ms. Hathaway's small group, and she pointed out that the girls were emotionally invested in their subject and that at one point, Elizabeth said to Victor, who was showing no concern for the suffering children, "Look, stop it, Victor! This is serious!"

Our shared empathy for exploited victims around the world strengthened the bonds we shared, which contributed to students' good feelings about being in the class. This work also fostered students' sense that they could *do something*: they could raise awareness of these issues, whether in the form of a public service announcement (recorded as a podcast), a children's picture book, a PowerPoint presentation, or a short video. This student empowerment further boosted the students' task engagement. Lauren, a shy student who collaborated with Fernanda, an English language learner, to create a simple video to raise awareness for child laborers, said, "You can do a project that can make a difference to people, and I really enjoy it." These are not the voices of passive students dutifully completing worksheets, but, rather, voices of students who feel engaged by real-world challenges.

Positive relationships also helped sustain students' focus on required but not necessarily "fun" activities. In addition to participating in WebQuest sessions, during which students and teachers, sitting in small groups, often discussed outrage and sadness over alarming statistics, the class practiced comprehension strategies, a less-popular activity. While classroom teachers and I rarely achieved 100% engagement during strategy instruction, field notes capture several instances in which students hushed nearby peers when we asked the class to refocus. It is possible they simply valued strategy lessons as helpful, but I sensed their regular eye contact with us, as well as their willingness to facilitate cooperative behavior among peers, were likely an act of solidarity in the face of the social atrocities we were trying to combat.

When it came to taking the reading comprehension test at the end of the unit, even after various students groaned, participants such as Elizabeth, Lauren, and Christie nevertheless smiled when I confessed that I, too, had always disliked such tests in school, and they nodded when I asked them to do their best to "beat" their test. Their willingness to put forth effort could be at least partially explained by the bonds to which their body language attested.

### Combination 3: Regular Practice with Comprehension Strategies, Peer Interaction, and Leadership Roles

It took time to nudge students from passive to active reading behaviors. Recalling early strategy lessons, Ms. Adams said, "At first I would be like *oh my gosh, where are they getting this as the main idea?* They would totally miss the boat sometimes, but as time went on, their comprehension really improved." It was true; we had a rough start. Students often did not *think*; they rushed to the end of a text and declared they were "done."

Regular practice, however, reaped rewards. At the close of the unit, Ms. Adams agreed they had come a long way: "I think they're definitely think-

ing more while they read. Before, they just went through something and [did] not really care a lot of times; . . . whereas now I think they're asking each other some good questions and they're stopping [to use strategies] because they've seen us do it so much that it's become a part of how they're reading."

As students' self-confidence with strategy use developed, so did their willingness not only to participate during whole- and small-group strategy practice but also to justify responses to teachers and peers. No longer were they willing to accept "any old answer" from peers. Ms. Adams noted, "It was good when people like Matthew and Elizabeth started noticing, *'That's not really relevant information; that's not anything really to do with the main point.'*" We overheard students challenging illogical predictions, helping one another with vocabulary, and asking thought-provoking questions. Take Anton, for example, a quiet boy who usually preferred to work alone, asking peers for clarification of unknown vocabulary while leading his group through strategic reading:

> "What does regression mean?" Anton asked his group, after reading a polar bear article aloud. Harold responded, reading a definition included as a footnote. Anton continued reading aloud, pausing to make a prediction: "It looks as though they will become extinct." Harold then asked, "Do you think it's too late to save the bears?"

Most students enjoyed the chance to lead small-group strategy practice and took their roles seriously. For example, on hearing he would be in charge of his group, Shelton called out, "Yeah! Yeah man! I'm the discussion leader." While reading a chapter aloud on Alaskan sled dogs, he paused to probe peers' thinking, saying, "What do you think will happen next?" or "Do you have any questions?"

Literacy acquisition is a long-term, developmental process; there are no quick-fix solutions, but we found strategy practice useful in developing seeds of self-confidence in students' reading skill, seeds that, with enough fertile soil, in the form of stimulating, engaging environments, might germinate, slowly but surely, into sustained reading motivation. The interview and WebQuest activities tapped students' curiosity and put them at the center of open-ended inquiry processes that provided choice of research tasks and readings while challenging them to grapple with real-world problems and issues. Interpersonal bonds around questions of social justice promoted engagement with unit texts. Technology facilitated these connections, allowing students to access online texts from around the globe and to create digital products of their own, but students' hearts and our encouragement, often in the form of small-group mentorship, made the connections real and enduring.

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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION** **Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

"Helping a Teen Plan and Conduct an Interview" offers advice on how to prepare students to conduct an interview to create a more positive, productive experience for everyone involved. The site includes a video that can be shared with the students. http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/helping-teen-plan-conduct-30113.html