Motivating Students to Read in the Content Classroom: Six Evidence-Based Principles

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Research tells us that children who have interests are engaged, and that engaged thinkers and readers are better students (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). This is because children who are motivated to read spend more time reading than their less motivated peers (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999). Furthermore, readers who are engaged as children have a greater chance of becoming lifelong readers (Morrow, 1992), which makes it all the more critical that at an early age we capture students' imaginations with print that sustains their attention and keeps them reading into adolescence and beyond (Brozo, 2005).

Being aware of the importance of motivating students to be active readers is one thing; finding the right ways to do so is often quite another. Based on a national survey of motivation to read (Donahue, Daane, & Yin, 2005), a large majority of fourth graders in the United States reported that reading was not a favorite activity and they did not read frequently for enjoyment. It's clear, then, that for some students it's difficult to motivate them to read, even when they are permitted to engage with text of their own choosing. Motivating these same students to read required content text presents another formidable challenge to many teachers. This challenge is not restricted to reluctant readers (Baker & Wigfield, 1999). The same survey (Donahue et al., 2005) also found that most U.S. fourth graders thought they didn't learn much from reading a book.

If students find the texts they're asked to read unappealing or too difficult and the teaching practices around these texts fail to engage, then they may avoid reading about important topics in the content areas (Strommen & Mates, 2004), which is detrimental in two ways. First, students who don't read content texts run the risk of never acquiring critical background knowledge, which is the foundation for academic success (Hirsch, 2008). Moreover, because content text requires greater effort to process and understand, students need more—not fewer—print experiences with them. The less time students spend engaged with content area text the more underdeveloped their reading skills will be for this type of material.

In addition to possessing skills for developing students' academic vocabularies (the topic of our previous installment), teachers need to be capable of imbuing students with excitement about reading and learning from text in social studies, math, science, and the language arts. The following six evidence-based principles can serve as guides to instructional practices in the content areas that are motivating and engaging.

Elevating Self-Efficacy

Academic self-efficacy is the belief and confidence that students have about their capacity to accomplish meaningful tasks and produce a desired result in academic settings. The evidence is clear that students who possess high, school-related self-efficacy are more engaged and motivated than students with low self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996). These engaged students, whether economically privileged or not, outperform their less-engaged peers (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Content teachers can create the conditions for students that are associated with increased perceptions of competence and, consequently, a willingness to sustain effort to be successful (Pintrich & Schunk, 2001).

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Engendering Interest in New Learning

One way to build self-efficacy in the classroom is to generate interest in the new content. Students are more likely to put forth the effort necessary to read and learn if the material and the learning activities interest them (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). And the more effort they expend the greater the chance for successful reading and learning to occur. We now know more than ever before about the influence of student interest on literacy and learning (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). We understand that students must have more than skill; they must also possess the will to read and learn. This realization should lead teachers to incorporate a variety of instructional practices that embrace multiple forms of literacy, multiple sources of information, and student choice related to what they are learning (Rycik & Irvin, 2001).

Connecting Outside With Inside School Literacies

The most interesting texts in the content areas may be those that students recognize and create from their everyday worlds. Alvermann (2003) has argued that the same students can be aliterate with academic texts but highly engaged readers and users of new media. A student who struggles with or finds little reason to read a textbook may be engaging in literate practices at home such as reading graphic novels, e-mailing, instant messaging, participating in chat rooms and blogs, and consulting computer and video game magazines for strategies. Thus, motivating these students to read and learn in the content classroom may get easier when they are helped to find and make connections between lesson topics and their everyday, multiliteracy practices (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2003/2004).

Making an Abundance of Interesting Texts Available

According to findings from the national survey referred to earlier (Donahue et al., 2005), it is important to ask why such large numbers of fourth graders are turning off to reading. One explanation is that they are replacing reading with engagement in other media. Another is that required, school-based reading restricts motivation for reading in general (Guthrie, 2008). Regardless of the exact reason, students need to have easy access to interesting print materials if we expect them to become engaged readers (McQuillan & Au, 2001). However, this isn't always easy. We know that the books students would prefer to read are often scarce or nonexistent in school (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Therefore, introducing texts from students' everyday worlds and a wide range of genres in content lessons holds great promise for motivating students to read in the content classroom (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004). Readers are encouraged to review the ReadWriteThink website (www.ReadWriteThink.org) for helpful information and ideas about using multiple sources of information.

Expanding Choices and Options

Choice may be one of the most critical elements of motivation (Turner, 1995). As students advance through the grades, their choices about many things outside of school increase significantly, yet options in school remain limited. For instance, teachers may require students to answer a question in only one way or read just the assigned texts. Allowing students more input into the texts they read, the response options they use to demonstrate content acquisition, and even the kinds of learning experiences they might participate in, will increase autonomy and agency (Freeman, McPhail, & Berndt, 2002; Lee, 1999).

Structuring Collaboration for Motivation

Collaboration for motivation refers to critical social networks that support students' literacy and content learning. First and foremost is collaboration between teacher and student. Student motivation increases when teachers are their allies in the reading and learning process (Guthrie, 2008). At the same time, teachers can create opportunities for students to work together in the pursuit of new knowledge. Increased attention to social motivation in the classroom can lead to more intrinsically motivated readers and

to increased achievement in reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Collaborative engagement in the classroom also helps increase students' sense of belonging (Anderman, 1999), which has been associated with an increase in motivation for reading and learning (Nichols & Miller, 1994).

A Final Word

Teachers who plan content area instruction with these six evidence-based principles in mind will seek ways of making learning interesting and worthwhile; will create learning contexts that maximize participation in reading, writing, and thinking; and will always account for motivation and engagement when considering students' classroom experiences.

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