

Learning to Love Reading

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I have been teaching adult beginning reading classes for five years in a center located in the mountains of Georgia. Mountain people, long isolated from the outside world, have developed solid family ties and a strong oral language, but have traditionally placed little emphasis on education. While this appears to be slowly changing, reading is difficult or even impossible.

In the fall of 1995, I participated in a practitioner research project. Choosing an area in which to conduct research was not difficult. The greatest problem I faced was helping those students who failed to make any significant progress, through my observations and their own, in spite of their personal motivation, commitment, and apparent ability to learn. Over the years, I have had ten or 12 students, who came to class faithfully, studied at home, willingly tried new techniques in class, and still made agonizingly slow progress. Drawing on methods learned during my years as an elementary teacher and in graduate school, I had tried both traditional strategies such as phonetic analysis and language experience, and novel interventions such as the use of color and music to enhance learning. These approaches led to little discernible progress.

A literature search unearthed little concerning adults learning to read. However, when I looked at literature dealing with teaching children to read, the overwhelming consensus was that children must spend a great deal of time practicing emerging skills if they are to become proficient readers. Gillet and Temple, in *Understanding Reading Problems-Assessment and Instruction* (1994), document numerous studies, such as Collins (1980) and Manning and Manning (1984), which point to the positive correlation between time spent reading and reading achievement. They state that people learn to read by reading and that, "we must use all our creativity and all our influence to get every student, especially the remedial reader, to read real books every day."

Later I found articles that supported the concept of adult beginning readers needing to read a great deal as well. According to Jago (1995), "the more a person reads, the easier the act becomes." Fink and Devine (1993) propose that many low-level readers read poorly because they never practice the skills they have. Only by practicing emerging skills do beginning readers develop the fluency and automaticity needed to become able readers. They suggest encouraging adults to develop the habit of reading regularly.

Discussions with my current students revealed that they rarely, if ever, read at home. We had talked about the importance of doing so, and I had modeled reading, read aloud, and provided books and magazines in the classroom. In spite of my efforts, students rarely read anything at home. This led me to think about ways to motivate them to read more outside of class.

My primary research question was whether the students in my ABE program would experience greater gains in reading fluency and comprehension after reading for 15 minutes or more a day than they had without doing this reading. The second focus was the influence of personal incentives on student motivation to do the reading outside of class.

Initial interviews with each student determined what materials they read at home and how much time they spent reading outside of class. Very little time was spent reading at home: in most cases, less than 15 minutes a week. Next, I gave a battery of tests to measure reading ability and fluency before the project. These tests included the ABLE/Level 1; an informal reading inventory taken from Nadine Rosenthal's book, *Teach Someone to Read* (1987); and a taped oral reading. The results of these tests showed the students reading at a wide range of ability levels, ranging from below first grade level to 6.7, with the average of 5.6.

I then gave the students weekly reading logs. They filled in their logs with the titles of the material they read outside of class, the amount of time they spent reading, and what they thought about the material. Each week, they turned the logs in and took another.

We discussed the idea of incentives to help motivate them to read outside of class. The students had selected pens, mugs, book bags, etcetera, from catalogs, and also planned how we should

distribute the prizes. We would have a drawing whenever a student reached a reading milestone -- for example, five hours of outside reading.

We missed more than three weeks of school due to icy roads. Despite missing a day or two each week, however, most of the students carried on with their reading at home. Our shipment of incentives was delayed by the weather as well. When it finally arrived, they said they had forgotten there were supposed to be prizes. At their suggestion, we saved them until the end of the project, since they were remembering to read at home without them. When I questioned further, two said that keeping the weekly reading log was reminder enough.

After three months, I gave post-tests (the same ABLE and taped oral reading). I conducted closing interviews and handed out the prizes. The 8 student participants logged in a total of 318 hours of reading outside of class. Bobby, with the lowest reading level, read a total of three hours, in ten-minute segments. Another student, Joe, logged in 108 hours, averaging close to ten hours a week.

Tests revealed measurable changes in reading ability. All students showed significant progress on the Reading Comprehension sub-test. The class average on that sub-test went from a grade level of 5.6 to 7.8, a gain of 2.2 grade levels in three months. Each score was also the highest score that student had ever achieved. Improvement was also noted in oral reading, in the areas of expression, smoothness, and attention to punctuation.

We also observed many life changes over the course of the project. One student bought a book for herself; another began reading to her child every evening. Students began to check out books, and they began to share in the selection of new books and willingly told others in class about books they had enjoyed.

The students began noticing changes in their own lives. They said that they read more than they ever had. Jim said he could understand more. Anne's husband commented that she didn't ask for help as often as she had, even though she was reading a lot more. Joe expressed it best when he said, "I love reading now; I didn't before."

Conclusions

My conclusions are two-fold. First, my class's experience supports the theory that reading outside of class does have a positive effect on the reading abilities of ABE students. The test results bear this out and the students expressed this, too. Second, filling out the logs and turning them in weekly was a great motivational tool. The students enjoyed keeping the logs and felt that they reminded them to keep reading.

I have several recommendations based on this project. One, certainly, is to encourage ABE students to keep daily reading logs. Another is that teachers acquire a classroom library of books and materials for students to check out. I believe that having a variety of high-interest, low-level materials readily available was critical to the success of this project. Involving students in the selection of books for the classroom seems to be important, too. Students were more enthusiastic about checking out books they had chosen and for which they had waited than they had been about books which had been selected for us.

Further research is, of course, needed. Weaknesses of this project include the small sample size and the lack of a control group. The study was also limited by the homogeneity of the students. The students in my classroom were white, low-income adults, living in a rural area. Increasing the number of participants considerably and extending the research to differing racial, socioeconomic, or cultural groups would add depth to the study and would increase generalizability.

This page is located at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=462> See this article for a list of references.

Summarized by Bella Hanson.