Learning to Love Reading

by Donna Earl

I have been teaching adult beginning reading classes for five years in a center located in an old elementary school in the mountains of North Georgia. Teaching adults in a rural mountain community has been both a joy and a challenge. The Southern Appalachians, while culturally rich, are often economically and educationally poor. 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, for too many adults in our community, reading is difficult or even impossible.

In the fall of 1995, I participated in a practitioner research project that gave me the chance to work with a network of adult literacy providers from across the state. 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. These students ranged from a 19-year-old high school graduate who wanted to improve her reading skills enough to get a job to a 55-year-old grandfather who was tired of job advancements passing him by. Several young men came to class desiring skills so they could read their own job manuals, and one older man wanted to read his Bible for himself. 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. We even tried Barbara Vitale's (1982) colored transparencies over the reading material. These approaches led to little discernible progress. One student had gained six months on the reading comprehension sub-test of the Adult Basic Learning Exam (ABLE). He had attended class faithfully for four years. Another student had made two years' progress in her first year of class and had then made no further gains. Not all students experienced these problems, but for those who did, it was very frustrating.

I went to the first practitioner inquiry retreat hoping to find "the key" I had been looking for. 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, some of whom had been studying with me for a number of years, 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,
Second, filling out the logs and turning them in weekly was a great motivational
factor for many of the students. The test results bear this out and the students expressed this, too. 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.

The winter of 1996 was severe here in north Georgia. 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, and not one student ever asked about it. When it arrived in March, the students laughed and said they had forgotten there were supposed to be prizes. Several suggested that we save them until the end of the project since they were remembering to read at home without them. When I questioned further, two students said that keeping the weekly reading log was reminder enough. One gentleman, Jim, said he had always wanted to read but never found the time. "That log sheet reminds me to make the time" he stated. So, we kept the "incentives" and gave them out at the end of the project.

After three months, I gave post-tests. They included the same battery of tests in alternate forms and a second taped oral reading. I conducted closing interviews and handed out the prizes. The eight student participants logged in a total of 318 hours of reading outside of class. Bobby, the student 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. No student lost ground in any area tested and 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 that she had read in class. Another began reading to her child every evening. Jim began reading scripture passages aloud in class and to his church. Twice he read verses over the local radio station. Students began to check out books from the classroom library more often, and several borrowed books from me and from the GED classroom. They began to share in the selection of new books from catalogs and willingly told others in class about books they had enjoyed.

One morning, Jessie met me at the door with a book of short stories in her hand. As she gave me the book, she asked me to read a certain story. "It's the funniest story I ever read. You've got to read this," she explained. I sat down to read, while she watched, expectantly, over my shoulder. When I got to the climax, she laughed with me, sharing the joy of good literature. This was the highlight of the project for me: a moment which is shared rather than taught.

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 in 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 factor.
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.

References


