LEARNING TO READ... BY READING?!?!

— Sunday, March 25, 2012

I recently read an article that was lauding a Delaware high school honors chemistry class for being "innovative" and "different." What amazing new approach to learning was being implemented? Put simply, the students were learning to do what?! You mean they were learning science by actually doing science?!! Duh! Well, if it works for science, then why don't we apply it to reading instruction?

In the original article, Dr. John Scali is being praised for his work in setting up and running this "innovative" approach (my finger quotes, not their words). And he should be. He seems to be doing right by his students, really preparing them for the lifetimes that await them outside of school. In Dr. Scali's class, students engage in projects, working "hands-on" to complete assignments that lead to understanding of chemistry. Dr. Scali puts a lot of emphasis on comprehending concepts rather than fact memorization. He points out that concepts are repeated throughout the year giving students plenty of opportunities to attain them when they are ready. The article also points out that Scali's approach teaches the skills of time management and critical and analytical thinking, skills that can benefit anyone in the real world. The students reap these benefits while learning more about their subject. As Scali says, "It's what goes on in the real world. I place a lot more priority on the process of science itself â€“ the process is a lot more important."

Well, that's pretty straightforward: when kids do science, kids learn science. So let's apply Scali's philosophy to the California reading classroom (the district in which I teach is in California), I believe our activities as well as our outcomes (regarding reading progress) would look very different from how they exist now.

THE "INNOVATIVE" READING CLASSROOM

In a "learning by doing" reading class, reading instruction focuses on higher level thinking and time management. It also places students in for independent reading and reading to accomplish a task. Finally, the class should be planned in such a way that allows for discussion groups and long term reading assignments. These activities encourage critical thinking, time management, and the ability to recall information. In order to accomplish the activities, of course, time must be built in for independent reading. Yup, I'm talking about "learning by doing" sustained silent reading (SSR).

"YOU CAN'T DO THAT!"

Unfortunately, in this age of high-stakes testing, there have arisen impediments in many schools, especially schools that have not historically had high reading scores as measured on the state tests. For example, in my district, so many schools have failed to meet all their annual sub-group goals (a massive discussion unto itself) that the district has been classified as a "Program Improvement" (PI) district. As a result, sanctions were to be had and requirements were to be placed. One of the requirements is fidelity to a state-approved, research-based curriculum. In our case, the Houghton Mifflin (HM) Reading program. Fidelity to the program requires utilizing many elements and activities that are in direct contrast (some might even say opposition) to the "innovative" approach used by Dr. Scali. For example, where Dr. Scali encourages memorization of facts, the HM program revels in minutiae. Instead of emphasizing overall comprehension of reading materials, HM puts emphasis on developing discrete skills. (This is due to the fact that the state exam by which teachers, or I mean students are judged, er, assessed tests skills in isolation.) Also, there is little critical thinking embedded within the program. The activities are largely "read-the-question-answer-the-you-should-have-read style and the program is worksheet heavy. The reading selections (starting in upper elementary) are overwhelmingly excerpts, whether from novels or full-length non-fiction books. As such, there is little-to-no connection to the real world. Few "research-based" tasks are presented and the focus is not on the process of reading but the elements of reading. In fact, the process of reading by the student is so de-emphasized that during a training at the beginning of the school year, teachers were reminded that they not the students should be reading a mini-lesson had out loud during lessons. When I asked explicitly about the students get to practice reading, the response from the trainer was "during the second read-through." I pointed out that in many cases the "second read-through" mini-lessons had students reading only a paragraph or even as little as a sentence from the selection. The response from the trainer and other district personnel amounted to little more than a shrug.

Of course, we are not explicitly disallowed from having students read the curriculum selections. However, there are practical limitations to this exercise. Many teachers find that with so many discrete skills to practice in reading, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling, not to mention finding time to practice writing, there is little or no time to revisit the text. When they do find time for their students to read from the text, they often resort to having the students read aloud in some fashion so there can be no doubt that students are actually reading. Unfortunately, there are problems with this approach. Traditional choral reading, a method employed by many teachers,
tends to cause students to fall into robotic cadences which discourage comprehension (You would not believe how long it takes me to train this habit out of my upper-grade students)! Another activity used by some teachers is å€œprovençal reading. The trouble with this activity is the high incidence of disengagement; only one student is reading at a time, and many students are under the impression (with good reason) that once their turn is done, they no longer need to follow along. There are a few ways to avoid the pitfalls of these methods. When I must have students practice reading aloud, I am partial to what I call å€œnatural choral readingå€ and shoulder-to-shoulder buddy reading. All that being said, there is one thing we are not to do: sustained silent reading. It is not built into the HM program and district officials have proclaimed it verboten, which is ironic since our instruction is supposed to be å€œresearch basedå€ and å€œdata drivenå€ and there is plenty of research to suggest that SSR actually helps! But more on that later.

**LEARNING BY DOING**

I am constantly surprised and discouraged by how little actual reading goes on in our classrooms. Teachers teach, students respond orally, and often I may occasionally talk about or explain their answers, and goodness knows they take tests â€” lots of them! But actual reading? Mmmm, not so much. What we should be doing is giving our students more reasons to read and more opportunities to read!

As mentioned above, reading (and writing) activities should be real-world related and, whenever possible, attached to some kind of task, even if the task is reading for pleasure. Students can read history books (not just textbooks) to research events, read non-fiction science books for information about subjects that interest them to produce a PowerPoint presentation. They can write letters to the governor demanding an explanation as to why pizza is no longer being served at school, as a student of mine did a few years ago. (BTW, he received an actual response from then-governor Schwarzenegger demanding an explanation.) How much more rewarding is an activity when an accomplishment is tied to it? (Completing a worksheet is not an accomplishment!)

More reasons to read come in the form of emotional investment in what is being read. Most adults have felt the excitement of reading a book that â€œjust canâ€™t put downâ€ (If you are one of those who has not experienced this particular form of joy, I pity you and hold you in my prayers.) When in the grip of such emotion, we are compelled to read and often find ourselves putting off other activities in order to see what happens next. Why are we not encouraging that feeling in our students? Instead of having them read an excerpt from Dear Mr. Henshaw, where they have no idea who this Leigh Botts kid is and donâ€™t care why [â€œâ€] important for him to meet a real live author, have them read the whole book from beginning to end. They can grow to know and care about Leigh and his situation. Then when they read about his encounter with the author, they are invested in the event and are invested in and actually understand what is going on! A student of mine did a similar thing when state testing was over. I had my students choose from a list I provided a novel they were going to read in small group literature circles. The list included quality titles like The Cay, White Fang, and The Giver. Students were highly invested in the books, not only because they had assignments to accomplish for each section they read, but also because they actually cared about the characters and compelling stories. The discussions students were having about the books were deeper than any theyâ€™d had all year, and I was kept bouncing from group to group in order to stop students from â€œgiving awayâ€ the next part because so many would read ahead outside of school! Giving the students a reason to read resulted in more reading?!? Again, duh! (Completing a worksheet is not an accomplishment!)

**WHEN TO â€œDO ITâ€**

Now having given our children å€œreal reading reasons to read, we must give them the chances to read. Students should be encouraged, or even required, to read selections or novels at home and during the reading period at school. They could read during small-group workshop style sessions where they can help each other read: other students are reading out the next word is not helping). And there should be SSR! Of course, SSR does not mean simply å€œfree timeâ€. It must be self-selected, at the studentsâ€™ independent reading level, and monitored to ensure that students are on-task during the SSR period. And isnâ€™t it true that we must be sustained? Much like cardiovascular exercise, it is only beneficial when done daily for an extended period of time. In the past, I have had students as young as six years old go from struggling to stay on-task for 15 minutes at the beginning of the year to focused, intense reading for 30 minutes by the end of the year. The more they did it the easier it got for them and the more they wanted to do it!

Some administrators (and I have even heard some teachers) say that SSR during the reading period is useless. They may even assert that there is research that å€œproves it doesnâ€™t work, though I have never had anyone to point me in the direction of said research. But if you are one that needs å€œdata drivenå€, å€œresearch basedå€ conviction, here goes!

In a landmark study, Collins (1980) found that students who engaged in SSR moved faster through their å€œbasal reading. The researchers of a Reading Research Quarterly study from 1988 (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding) concluded that in 2nd through 5th grade classrooms, å€œthe amount of time a child spends reading books is related to å€œgrowth in reading proficiencyâ€ (p. 302), while a 1990 study (Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama) found that more time spent on reading in class å€œcontributes significantly to improvement in studentså€™ reading achievement. Learning to read by reading? Whoâ€™d a thunk? By the way, if you are one of the naysayers who would try to discredit these findings as outdated and no longer relevant, I would point out that between them, they have been cited in over 1000 scholarly articles since their publications.

**THE SIDE-EFFECTS**

Another reason some educators are reluctant to implement SSR is that they fear the imagined å€œside-effectâ€ of losing instructional time, which has become increasingly dear with the recent focus on å€œaccountabilityâ€ through high-stakes state testing. However, studies have concluded that including SSR does not result in declining spelling or grammar skills even though students were å€œlosingå€ up to half an hour of instructional minutes to SSR (Collins, 1980). Still not convinced, check out Stephen Krashenâ€™s 2004 paper on free voluntary reading where he presents the finding that in a meta-study of 53 comparison studies, 51 of the studies showed that readers allowed to engage in free reading or SSR did as well as students who only had å€œregular instructionå€ (no SSR). Even more satisfying is the fact that when looking at long-term studies, Krashen found that free reading students â€œwere nearly always...
better in reading than regular instruction students!

A likely positive side-effect of SSR in the classroom is more reading outside the classroom. Researchers have repeatedly found that teachers and the activity of reading in-class have important influences on the amount of time students spend reading outside of school. Teachers can promote outside reading by providing time for reading during the school day (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, p. 296-297), as well as more obvious methods such as providing access to appropriate, interesting books, reading aloud to students, and giving incentives or rewards. While a causal relationship between reading outside of school and reading improvement is often tenuous (though arguable), the correlation is repeatedly pointed out, as in the 2001 international study (Ogle, et al) where it was noted that among 4th grade United States students, those who regularly read outside of school had higher literacy scores than those who never or almost never did outside reading. In other words, it may not help, but it sure can’t hurt!

**HOW TONY HAWK “DID IT”**

Tony Hawk is a pioneer of radical skateboarding. He began skateboarding at nine years old and tuned pro before he was 15. He learned to skate by listening to a lot of other skaters tell him how to do it, though he rarely got on a board himself. He went on to win over 70 skateboarding competitions before retiring from competitive skateboarding.

All of the above is true.

Except for the part about learning to skate. He learned to skate by watching videos. Duh!

I often relate the way we are currently required to teach reading with teaching skateboarding. We can show the kids what good skateboarding looks like we can get them excited about skateboarding by showing some really cool tricks, and we can explain where to put our feet and why. But if we never give the kids a board and plenty of time to practice, they will never really learn how to skate! I have lived my life not by learning how to do things but by actually doing them. When I wanted to learn how to be a DJ, I bought two turntables and started doing it. When I wanted to learn how to animate, I picked up a computer program and started doing it. If we want our students to learn to read, we should be letting them do it.

I always do that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it.

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**FOOTNOTES**

1. Natural choral reading is a technique I developed which is related to the neurological imprint method. I read slightly louder than the students and at an appropriate speed. Students read in natural voices, not “choral reading” voices or loudness. The focus is on building fluency while retaining the natural intonations of natural literary language. As student read, they follow along with their fingers, though I don’t always enforce this if I can tell that the student’s following along and reading not just echoing.

2. Shoulder-shoulder buddy reading is an activity where students read aloud quietly in pairs. Students sit in chairs placed right next to each other. The chairs are facing in opposite directions so that when the students are seated, they are facing opposite each other with their shoulders touching or nearly touching. This has the benefit of placing each reader’s ear in proximity to the other’s mouth. As a result, they can read in soft voices without disturbing other students who may be doing the same or working on other activities in the same room. I often choose to pair high-ability readers with low-ability readers so that the higher student can serve as a model to the lower.

**REFERENCES**


(Mr. Flores is a 20-year veteran B-CLAD teacher with a Masters Degree in Reading Instruction and holds a Reading Specialist Certificate.)

**Tags:** SSR, reading

**COMMENTS**

**Darlene** - 03/25/2012

Mr. Flores, Ditto to everything Ramona said including what a privilege it is to have worked beside you. I hope parents everywhere will read this and implement their own SSR at home since our students don’t get time at school. Why not at home?

**ramona** - 03/25/2012

You are a courageous, innovative teacher who considers the needs of children and responds to their needs! So happy to work alongside you! Bravo!!!

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New Book. Select Category. Stars 4.9+ 4.8+ 4.7+ 4.6+ 4.5+ 4+ 3+. The button above will send you to the Amazon page for this book. Random book. We Want Your Screenshots!
Submitted by Lady N on Tue, 09/18/2018 - 10:50. The prizes will be drawn at random on October 15th. They are: One honorable mention winner will receive one set of TES character pins. Book title generator. 10,000's of names are available, you're bound to find one you like. Note that due to the randomness of this generator, quite a few of the names will have faulty grammar. This happens the most with the last 2 names. But that's just the nature of a random generator. You can also add custom values to make sure the titles fit your story better. There are two input fields below, check the one you'd like, fill in whatever you like, and click "Get names" to get titles with your value.