Love of Reading: Tips on How to Cultivate It in Children by Ron Seagal

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How many times have you encountered students who â€œhatedâ€• to readâ€”who apparently had to be fo to read by any of various means of coercion or threat? Have you ever noticed instances where one of those very children had once (at an earlier age) eagerly engaged reading material, driven by a native passion to discover and grow? What are some of the key factors that promote or inhibit a love of reading?

Work at each studentâ€™s ability level and incrementally build it up from there

For some, the response to the demand that students know more is to put increasingly sophisticated material earlier and earlier into the school curriculum. They reason that if a student has trouble when algebra is introduced (as an example) in the 7th grade, then the solution is to introduce algebra starting in the 2nd gradeâ€”and to let it somehow â€œseep in through the pores of the skinâ€• as t student moves forward. In reality, higher levels of mathematics are understood to the degree that every one of the steps below them have been thoroughly mastered.

It may seem rewarding to say that a young student read a sophisticated work of literature, but if the student hated the whole process and didnâ€™t understand any of it (as it was over their head), then there truly is no victory worth celebrating. You have to give children books at a level that they can read with success. This doesnâ€™t mean coddling children into reading only simple books. The point is certainly to move them up into higher levels, but to do so by moving them along at an incremental progression that promotes genuine progress.

If you were a weight trainer, would you continually insist that a student lift 200 pounds of weight when he couldnâ€™t even lift 100 pounds? Then, when the student continued to fail and suffer and experience heavy strain at the level of 200 pounds, would you respond by giving them special strategy sessions or coping sessions orâ€¦? Clearly, it would be much more effective to move the student to a lower level of weight and to vigorously train them upwards from there.

By forcing students to read books above their level, you lock them into a losing situation and promote distaste for reading.

Work with a studentâ€™s natural interests

I have often resolved student resistance to reading by working with the childâ€™s natural interests. I donâ€™t ask a resistant reader, â€œWhat are you interested in reading?â€• The answer will likely be â€œo Instead, through routine conversation and interaction, I find out the childâ€™s interests. I then find books at an appropriate level on those specific topics. I donâ€™t make it an academic exercise. I donâ€ even necessarily announce that weâ€™re going to read. I simply start sharing some â€œcoolâ€• informati about bugs or skateboards or karate or rocket ships (or whatever interests the student) that happens to be in a particular book.

I donâ€™t portray reading as a dull exercise; reading is the medium for some very interesting communication. Particularly in the beginning, I may have to do more of the reading (while the student follows along). As the student gets more engaged, they begin to read more. All the while, I participate in animated conversation with the student about the content of what weâ€™re reading. My interest is real. The scene looks less like a teacher teaching a student how to read than it looks like two people excitedly talking about a great movie theyâ€™ve seen. All the while, the studentâ€™s ability a desire to read are improving.

Shouldnâ€™t the student be reading only the finest literature? One certainly wants a student to read fine literature, but letâ€™s first put the emphasis on creating interest and ability in the area of reading. Then, with an increasing amount of capital of interest and willingness, it becomes much easier to progressively stretch the student into different genres and types of reading material. Think of these two choices: (1) You do battle with a student by trying to force them to read three particular classic books, with heavy resistance, very slow progress, and a crushed interest in reading; (2) By aligning with a studentâ€™s interests, you ignite an interest in reading such that they avidly read scores of books (and some of them are classics).

Start by making a reader rather than immediately trying to make a literary critic

Hereâ€™s an analogy. Suppose a teacher/mentor is trying to get you interested and skilled in carpentry, which is a relatively new area of endeavor for you. The teacher begins by taking you through the process of constructing a simple box. Suppose you work for 10 minutes cutting the sides of the box and then the teacher stops for a discussion on types of saws: hand saw, rip saw, hacksaw, circular saw, table saw, radial arm saw, miter saw, rotary saw, concrete saw, and so on. You start to hammer sides together and a few minutes into that the teacher has you do an analysis of types of hammers and their uses: claw hammer, ball pein, cross pein, club hammer, sledge hammer, mallet, and so on. Suppose your work continues to get frequently interrupted with exercises such as a dissection of types of boxes and their uses, types of sandpaper, famous carpenters, and on down the list. Would this process most likely result in you developing a keen sense of discernment, judgment, creativity, and skill in the art of carpentry or might it more likely tend to blunt your interest in the subject?

What happens if we heavily push students into literary analysis and critique before they have (a) mastered reading with high fluency; (b) mastered reading with high comprehension; (c) read many works from many different authors in a variety of different styles; and (d) developed their natural passion for reading? Before these points have been achieved, to what degree should students be made to dissect written work: protagonist, antagonist, plot, setting, theme, simile, metaphor, allusion, alliteration, hyperbole, personification, foreshadowing, genreâ€¦? How much of this will be acquired naturally by students if they are allowed to develop into skilled and experienced readers? Writing is an art form. Reading involves an experience of this form of art. It involves communication. When a person attends a concert, do they typically analyze each bar of music as it passes along?

A person with a high level of knowledge, skill and experience in a field will tend to have good judgment and analytical thinking in that field. Thatâ€™s desirable. However, these desirable abilities arenâ€™t necessarily nurtured by trying to make a literary critic before one has made an excellent reader who enjoys reading. One doesnâ€™t cultivate a love of reading by making reading into a testing process. On the other hand, when we focus on the students by using literature at their level of ability that aligns with their interestsâ€”and when we make skilled readers who read by choiceâ€”such students (as it turns out) tend to do well on the language arts portions of standardized tests.

Encourage and cultivate reading for understanding

Think of a time when you were completely absorbed by some material that you were reading. With that material, were you merely skimming and using rote memorization without really grasping itâ€”or was genuine understanding taking place? In some cases, actual reading has been supplanted with shallow substitutes. Reading has at times become getting â€œvague impressionsâ€• or â€œguessingâ€• skimming through and trying to isolate a few bullet points. Such activities can often serve to help a student to pass an immediate testâ€”only to lose the information a few weeks (or even a day) later. Undigested information goes in and is subsequently spit out; goes in, gets spit out; goes in, gets spit outâ€¦the majority of it ultimately washed away. When students â€œreadâ€• in this fashion throughout the many years of schooling, they can be given a false sense of security. After all, they are passing the tests. They appear to be winning in the system. One day, however, they will have to walk into the â€œrealâ€• world. In the â€œrealâ€• world, genuine understanding is required in order to be highly effecti

In working with students, promote reading with understanding. Promote reading where a real connection and real communication are taking place. Further, promote taking the understandings gained from written material and applying them to produce desired results.

Set an example

Setting an example means openly enjoying reading yourself. Reading should not be conveyed to children as a sort of punishment that one must endure; it should be naturally conveyed as an enjoyable and desirable communication medium that opens up a world of knowledge, imagination, and entertainment.

One adult who sets an outstanding example of cultivating a love of reading (by employing strategies that work, even if they may not always be considered â€œtraditionalâ€•) is nationally acclaimed sixth-grade language arts teacher Donalyn Miller. Year after year she has consistently made students into avid readers, with her students typically reading upwards of 40 books in a school year. It seems that her classroom has been transformed into a cozy and inviting library, where students are able to exert some choice in the books they selectâ€”and where reading is given top priority (not book reports and worksheets). [To find out more about Donalyn Miller and her strategies, go to BookWhisperer.com]

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