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**You Can't Pass It On If You  
Don't Have It:  
Encouraging Lifelong Reading**

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**Abstract**

Teachers need to demonstrate a love of reading in order to pass it on to their students. This article discusses ways to encourage this love of reading through book groups, reading goals, daily oral and silent reading, and sharing the impact of reading with students.

Encouraging students of all ages to read is an important part of our mission as teachers, whether we teach elementary school or secondary science. When we demonstrate the delight and inspiration that we get from reading, we send students a strong message; reading matters. If we want reading to matter to our students, it must matter to us and we must show this. We must also talk about it and reward it.

This article gives various suggestions for doing just that – showing students how reading matters to all of us and ultimately encouraging students to be lifelong readers, too. In this technology-rich information age, more than ever before, knowledge is power. She who reads, leads, or can if she so desires. This is the power of lifelong reading.

## Who We Are

So that the reader might understand the context of this article, it is important to introduce ourselves. We are sisters, who happen to also be professors of literacy at the same institution. We teach undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy instruction. We are also both parents and lifelong readers and writers.

## Book Groups

One of the ways we show that reading matters to us is by belonging to a book group. Started nearly three years ago, our book group includes six members: two of us (college professors), two classroom teachers (5<sup>th</sup> grade and 7<sup>th</sup> grade), a retired health care provider, and a person employed with a local newspaper. We meet every month to discuss the book we have all read for that month. We also make food that fits the book, which is often challenging, but a fun extension of the book. We talk about why we did or didn't like the book, author, and characters. We share what the book reminded us of. We often share our favorite quotes in the book. In doing so, we find out who we are and how we are connected to the world within the context of a book. We share lively literary discussions that spark more reading. Sharing this book group experience enriches our teaching. We share our book group list with students when they ask for good adult books (see Appendix A). We show our lifelong love of reading by showing that we make reading a true priority in our lives. In turn, many of our students become readers themselves. In fact, several teachers, former students, e-mail us for what our book group is reading. They further share that their students want to know what they are reading.

Something teachers might consider is starting their own book groups (see appendix B for suggestions on starting a book group). This could be done with other teachers, or with some parents as well. Perhaps the group would like to read books about teaching or parenting, or books from the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. What is read is not nearly as important as the reading itself. By modeling a love of reading and talking about books in a book group, teachers show that they love to

read, too. They might also have parents who defend the professionalism of teachers, instead of the alternative.

Teachers might also extend the idea of book groups into classroom practice. Students could form book groups based upon their reading interests. Students could spend time weekly meeting in their book groups to discuss commonly read books and to plan future book group choices. The habit of lifelong reading could thus be established early on for students.

### Reading Goals

Each semester we have our students set reading goals. These goals are individual in nature and fit the special needs and interests of the diverse readers we have in classes. We model this process by first sharing our goals with our students. Often our goals are to read as many books as possible from a variety of genres including adult fiction, adult nonfiction, professional educational books and journals, and children's books. Students are then required to write their own goals for reading. These goals vary from reading award winning children's books, to reading the daily newspaper, to reading a book for pleasure (which many indicate that they have not done for years). At the middle of the semester we do a midterm assessment of our goals with our students. We ask what they have done and what they need to do yet to meet their goals. We also ask students to think about how they might document their reading for their portfolios. (See Appendix C for goal setting and midterm assessment examples.)

Documenting reading goals takes many forms. We have started to write down quotes and how this book had an impact on us in our reading records. Some students photocopy of the cover of the books they have read and write a response to the book on the back. Other students do an annotated bibliography of the books they have read. Still others create websites or Hyperstudio stacks where they link related titles, related topics, and author information. What truly matters here is that students are reading and documenting in various forms which make sense for them.

Teachers might like to set reading goals as well. First, write some goals of your own. Maybe your goal is to read all the Newbery Award winning and honor books for the year, or to read all the children's books nominated for the state reading award. Maybe a goal is to read the professional journal articles you have sitting in a pile on your desk. Encourage students to set their own reading goals for the quarter or semester, too. Maybe they love Tomie dePaola (a popular children's book author and illustrator) books, so that their reading goal might be to read as many of his books as they can in a two month period. Or maybe they have a strong interest in horses and want to read as many nonfiction books about horses as they can. Again, the reading goal itself doesn't matter as much as the routine of reading being established. When the routine of reading is established at school, this often spills over to reading at home as well. Students who are enjoying reading at school are often motivated to read for pleasure at home also.

Teachers can enhance students' comprehension of this reading by extending students' schemata. Mediating students' reading is one way to do this. Two teacher actions associated with mediating are: 1) asking questions; and 2) gradually releasing responsibility to students (Roehler, Duffy & Warren, 1988). Asking students about their reading and then eventually giving students the responsibility for initiating the discussion is an important step. As students learn to ask each other questions about their reading, they not only deepen their own comprehension, but they also learn about other books that they might want to read in the future.

### Daily Reading – Oral and Silent

We read aloud to our students in every class. Reading aloud motivates others to read. It increases their vocabulary and is one of the most powerful ways to enhance their learning. By reading aloud, we model fluency and enjoyment of reading. We expose students to quality writers, multicultural texts, and a variety of genres. When students look for books to read, they often choose those authors with whom they are familiar from our read aloud choices. Reading aloud then has a big impact on student reading choices.

We also provide time for voluntary reading in our classes, which often transfers to time spent reading at home. For elementary students there is a consistently positive relationship between the amount of voluntary independent reading completed at home and gains on standardized reading achievement tests and reading achievement in general (Greaney & Hagarty, 1987; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988). Additionally, extensive reading of material of many kinds, both in school and outside, results in substantial growth in the vocabulary, comprehension abilities, and information base of students (Allington, 1994).

Giving students time to read books of their own choosing sends a powerful message that reading matters. We honor reading by giving it time in our classrooms.

Providing students with a variety of materials from which to choose is also important. Children's access to quality school library media centers, staffed by professionals, has an impact on reading achievement and attitudes about reading. Books need to be available through both classroom collections and school-wide libraries. Classroom libraries give students immediate access, a factor likely to increase the amount of voluntary reading students do in and out of school (Routman, 1996).

### Demonstrating How Reading Impacts Us

We recently read the book *The Long Road Home* by Jim Harrison. In the book, one of the characters learns that she is dying and begins to write a list of "Things I Have Loved About Earth." Both of us were prompted to start our own lists after reading this book and to share the impact that this book had on us with our students. As a result, some of our students are keeping such a list, while others have asked to borrow the book. Reading affects our behaviors, perspectives, and outlooks. It moves us to reflect and consider who we really are as people.

Anna Quindlen has written a book about this, called *How Reading Changes My Life* (Quindlen, 1998). In it she says:

*All of reading is really only finding ways to name ourselves, and, perhaps to name the others around us so that they will no longer seem like strangers. Crusoe and Friday. Ishmael and Ahab. Daisy and Gatsby. Pip and Estelle. Me. Me. Me. I am not alone. I am surrounded by words that tell me who I am, why I feel what I feel* (Quindlen, 1998, p. 21).

Reading often moves us to write ourselves. We have written several books together (*Teacher Portfolios* and *Literature Connections Day-by-Day*). Anna Quindlen argues that often readers are writers:

*. . . I still reread that way, always have, always will. . . I think I know who we are, and how we got that way. We are writers. We danced with the words, as children, in what became familiar patterns. The words became our friends and our companions, and without even saying it aloud, a thought danced with them: I can do this. This is who I am* (Quindlen, 1998, p. 52).

Reading not only leads to more reading for some of us, but it also encourages us to write ourselves, to play with those patterns of language as we figure out who we are.

The first step then in getting students excited about reading is to demonstrate our own love of reading as teachers. We can't *teach* enthusiasm for reading, students must *catch* it from us. If we want to pass on this love of reading to our students, we must show students the impact that reading has had on our own lives and encourage students to feel that power as well.

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**APPENDIX A: BOOKS READ IN BOOK GROUP**

- Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie*. 1997.
- Ambrose, Stephen. *Undaunted Courage*. 1996.
- Barrett, Andrea. *The Voyage of the Narwal*. 1998.
- Benitez, Sandra. *Bitter Grounds*. 1997.
- Berendt, John. *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. 1994.
- Evans, Nicholas. *The Loop*. 1998.
- Flagg, Fannie. *Welcome to the World, Baby Girl!*. 1998.
- Forbes, Leslie. *Bombay Ice*. 1998.
- Frazier, Charles. *Cold Mountain*. 1997.
- Gaffney, Patricia. *The Saving Graces*. 1999.
- Godwin, Gail. *Evensong*. 1999.
- Golden, Arthur. *Memoirs of a Geisha*. 1998.
- Gowdy, Barbara. *The White bone*. 1999.
- Graham, Janice. *Firebird*. 1998.
- Gutschon, Beth. *Five Fortunes*. 1999.
- Harr, Jonathan. *A Civil Action*. 1995.
- Harris, Thomas. *Hannibal*. 1999.
- Harrison, Jim. *The Road Home*. 1998.
- Haruf, Kent. *Plainsong*. 1999.
- Hegi, Ursula. *Stones From the River*. 1994.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *True At First Light*. 1999.
- Junger, Sebastian. *The Perfect Storm*. 1997.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Poisonwood Bible*. 1998.
- Krakauer, Jon. *Into Thin Air*. 1997

- Lamb, Wally. *She's Come Undone*. 1992.
- Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies*. 1999.
- Lennon, Robert. *The Light of Falling Stars*. 1997.
- McCourt, Frank. *Angela's Ashes*. 1996.
- McNeal, Tom. *Goodnight, Nebraska*. 1998.
- Mendelsohn, Jane. *I Was Amelia Earhart*. 1996.
- Mitchard, Jacquelyn. *The Deep End of the Ocean*. 1996.
- Moore, Byran. *The Magician's Wife*. 1998.
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- Norris, Kathleen. *The Cloister Walk*. 1996.
- Quindlen, Anna. *Black and Blue*. 1998.
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- Schindler, Emilie. *Where Light and Shadow Meet*. 1996.
- Schine, Cathleen. *The Love Letter*. 1999.
- Smiley, Jane. *A Thousand Acres*. 1991.
- Smiley, Jane. *The All-True Travels & Adventures of Lidie Newton*. 1998.
- Wells, Rebecca. *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. 1996.
- Wells, Rebecca. *Little Altars Everywhere*. 1992.
- Yen Mah, Adeline. *Falling Leaves*. 1997.

## **APPENDIX B: SUGESTIONS FOR STARTING YOUR OWN BOOK GROUP**

Identify some people you know (and like) that read a lot, or would like to read more.

Invite them to an informal gathering to discuss forming a book group.

At the first meeting, discuss what everyone wants and needs from the group. Also discuss what you don't want or need.

Decide what kind of books you would like to read, and who will decide what to read next. Perhaps you will take turns choosing the books?

Discuss where to meet. Some groups like to meet at schools, libraries, bookstores, people's homes, or restaurants.

Choose your first book. Make certain everyone agrees with the selection.

At your first reading, ensure that everyone has a chance to share his or her opinions, feelings, and thoughts. Encourage individuals to feel comfortable sharing even unpopular responses. We all approach each new book differently because we all have had different prior experiences.

Open your mind to other people's interpretations.

Our book group also brings food that "fits the book" to each of our sessions. Maybe this would work for your group?

**READ and ENJOY!**

## APPENDIX C: READING GOALS

What are your strengths as a reader?

In what ways do you need to grow or stretch as a reader?

What are your weaknesses as a reader?

What are your reading goals this semester? Why?

### **Midterm Assessment of Reading Goals:**

What was your reading goal?

What have you done so far?

What do you need to do yet?

Process comments – what have you learned from this?

What are some possible artifacts to include in your portfolio to show how you met your goals?