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TURNING KIDS ON TO LANGUAGE

Robert D. Hughes

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One of the great problems we face as teachers is how to get kids interested in whatever it is that we want to teach them. Whether it is reading, writing, math, social studies, we know that the key to teaching success is motivation. "If we could just get them involved, we could teach them."

Some kids are interested in everything in the world round about them. They see excitement in their world and there is joy in learning. This is a beautiful thing to see, and it is these kids who "make a teacher's day." But some kids have been turned off somewhere along the line. They have failed, and they have become discouraged. They have not accepted school and teachers and reading as a way to find the things that they need to know.

So how do we "turn on" the kids who have been "turned off?"

The pat answer is, as every teacher knows, "to find something the student is interested in." And just what is that? I have often said that you could organize a field trip to the moon and some kids would complain about the long boring ride. And as the earth is fading away in the distance, some of the kids would really rather be reading a comic book than watching the sight out the window. "They've seen it before on television." (There may be a key to unlocking the motivational door in that comic book too, but that's another article.) So we never solve the motivational problem 100%; we just work at it. It is the purpose of this article to share some ideas that have worked for us in turning some kids on. We have gotten the kids into filmmaking, slide-sound combinations, and television. We have used media to the point that we feel we have become "the electric reading teacher." (No wonder we have borrowed the electric terms "turn on" and "turn off.") We have used mock trials, role playing, simulations, and dramas. We have brought in interesting speakers and tried to find good films. We have involved them in art activities and music activities. We have tried to solve the motivational problem in many ways, with some success and some failure.

Here is one idea that worked for me. I have shared the idea with some of my teacher friends and they too have had some success. I would like to share some of these successes with the readers of *Reading Horizons*.

One day I was driving to school wondering what I was going to do with a particularly wild bunch of seventh graders whom I was supposed to be helping with reading and writing problems at that time. It was a dull, rainy Monday morning and as I drove along in my half reverie, (I wonder how many other teachers have bad Sundays because they weren't quite sure what they were going to do on Monday?) all of a sudden I looked up through the rain and saw this race car. It too was coming through the rain. I thought it was white, and it seemed to be about a foot off the ground as it came at me at about 200 MPH. Wow, was that exciting. It was a billboard poster advertising Viceroy cigarettes. Boy, if I could get that poster and put it on the back wall of my seventh grade classroom I knew I could get some kids involved in reading and writing that I had never been able to involve before

(especially those reluctant boys). My wheels began to spin. I went back to the billboard poster and noted that it was put up by Central Advertising Company. I went back to school and looked them up in the telephone directory. But I didn't call. I decided that if they were going to deny me that poster for my kids, they were going to have to look me in the eye and say no. After three trips back (the secretary wasn't quite sure what to do with me; she had never had such a request,) I got to Jerry Luchies, the general manager of the company. I sold him on my idea. (And who can deny a teacher with a good and unique way to help children?). I walked out of the office with my first red Ferrari. I didn't know it was a Ferrari; in fact I wasn't even sure how to spell it (one of the kids had a Ferrari Hot Wheels.) I learned alot about the cars and racing from the kids. I walked out of that office that day not only with my red Ferrari, but a promise of every car poster to follow. There were ten. So the lesson here is that when you see something that may work with your kids, go after it. A teacher is a hard person to turn down.

I have also discovered that everyone is a latent teacher and likes to help kids. That goes for my busy dentist, who talks to the kids on career day, to a busy psychiatrist, who talked to my sociology class, to Stan Kenton, who came in to discuss his music one day when he was in town, to Louis Armstrong, who invited my students to attend a dress rehearsal as his personal guests when he found that we couldn't afford to attend the concert. Teachers have a great potential to tap resources. Armed with this knowledge, a little courage, and a belief that nothing may be impossible, I often felt that I could get the President of the United States to share with my class if he happened to be in town, and if I happened to ask him first (or at least the Vice President).

The car posters are now in classrooms all over the area. I have lost track of most of them, but still have three or four in my possession.

These are some of the ideas that have come back from the teachers who have used the posters.

It's possible to build a learning center around the cars. It is an impressive visual (the sections we use are about 6 by 18 feet.) We found assignments in Social Studies, Math, Science, Reading, and Writing. There were even some art activities. The kids designed their own race cars, researched their ideas, and wrote them up.

There are many reading activities. One of my student teachers collected all the books on racing that she could find. She ended up with nearly fifty books and periodicals which turned out to cover most interests and most reading levels. The collection covered everything from the *Checkered Flag* series to *Hotrod Magazine*.

We wrote our own ads. We analyzed the tactics being used by the advertising companies (thinking skills?).

Sample assignment:

What is the tactic being used when an advertisement states: "After going 212 m.p.h., he's not about to smoke a boring cigarette."

Other writing tasks:

A. J. Foyt is at the wheel.
How does the suspense make him feel?
He may miss a gear and begin to spin;
never drive a racecar again.
Describe his feelings.

Put yourself in the driver's seat.
Tell me how you feel.
Is speed and danger your thing?

If you were married, how do you suppose
your husband would feel while he was
watching you race? (a little social studies here)

Pretend you are the driver. Write a story
about the race you won. How did you feel?
How much money did you win? What did you
do with it? Did you quit racing?

Write a short history of auto racing.
Research your ideas.
Find as many things as you can about
auto racing.

Chart the development of auto racing.

Write a short history of the Indianapolis
500.

Write a history of Grand Prix racing.

It has been said that for every race
driver there are 50 men behind him.
What are some of these jobs?
Could any of them be done by women?
Are there any that couldn't be done
by women?

List some of the instruments you would
find in a race car. Explain their function.

Describe some of the safety features and
improvements on automobiles that have been
developed through racing.

Make a list of the major race tracks in the world. In the U.S. In this area.

Imagine that you are driving in a major race. You are slightly ahead. You are near the end and you are nearly out of fuel. What will you do? Describe these last few minutes of the race.

Describe your last feelings as you slam into the wall at 212 m.p.h.

Would you like to be a race driver? Explain why or why not.

Would you like to be a mechanic? Explain.

Draw up the kind of job application you would have to fill out to become a race driver.

How would you interview a potential driver? What questions would you ask him?

You are a spectator. Explain how you feel as you watch the cars go by at well over 200 m.p.h. A car begins to spin down the track. It is heading for you. What do you do?

In one school, the kids wrote to A. J. Foyt who is sponsored by local car dealer Jim Gilmore. Foyt sent a wealth of material and information and autographed pictures for all the kids.

In another school, some of the kids came to school dressed in their snowmobile suits to simulate race driving suits. They had their pictures taken standing by the poster. (They were involved!)

There were more involvement assignments:

Write the qualifications one must have to be a race driver. Could a woman qualify?

Write the qualifications one must have to be a mechanic.

Draw a picture of a race car. Carefully label all the parts.

Have you ever ridden in a race car?
Have you ever raced on the street?
Describe your experience.

The students wrote poetry. We found that if we gave them a certain form, they had a lot of fun with words. And after all, isn't that what language is all about? We tried Haiku and Cinquains. Some made up their own forms. Here are some examples:

Speed,
Roaring noise,
Turning the bend,
Such a thrilling race,
Faster!

Debbie Cook

John
flew by
lickety split
nice car — wasn't it!
Ouch

Life!
Fast, free?
Afraid, alone, or sure?
Some ups; some downs.
Me.

Speed
Driving, screeching
Fast, faster, fastest
Feeling great, roaring, winning!
Varooooomm

K. Wooden

Competition,
Fierce, acute
determination, intensity, accomplish
hours of ceaseless concentration
Survival

Racing down the slippery track,
Speeding, searching, striving . . .
To win the race and rest.

Marilyn Reilly

Race, race high
 Race, race let's fly
 Birds and clouds
 And trees and skies
 Life and love
 Before the eyes
 Race, race high
 Hear the echo of a million sighs.

Joy Campbell

There were many more poems and many more assignments.

· Have some technical books available. Kids could look up and write reports on specifications, cars, tracks, race tracks, etc. (It's very heady for children to feel they are the expert on something.)

— One teacher had the children make a sense chart about racing:

the sights . . . whizzing cars

The sounds . . . deafening engines

the taste . . . the smoke

the touch . . . dusty benches

and smells . . . exhaust Use your own imagination.

Then write a paragraph about racing using the words from the sense chart.

— Write a newspaper article about the outcome of the car in this race (poster).

— Interview the race car driver. Ask him to be specific about his feelings before, during, and after the race.

I received a letter from Pat Carlin, a former student of mine and now a creative teacher at North Elementary School in Hartford, Michigan. She teaches special reading classes. You know, the difficult kids. This is Pat's letter.

Dear Bob,

Thank you so much for lending us the picture of your billboard. I put the picture of the racing car up in the hall after Christmas, traditionally the time of those notorious January blahs.

I wish I had a camera to capture the students' first reactions. I put the poster up when they were out of the building (during recess). They were amazed, excited and reluctant to go on to class.

Here are some of the ideas we used:

- 1) I printed different words on large cardboard cards. The kids would place the cards on the poster (words like wheel, driver, door, number). This worked especially well with the 2nd and 3rd graders.

- 2) The kids (on their own) started drawing pictures of race cars and bringing them to me. I was getting pictures from kids I didn't have in class, or didn't even know. The door was completely covered with them.
- 3) We had a "name that car" contest. Anyone could submit an entry. The names were posted and we voted on them.
- 4) The Reading Incentive Program put out by Bowmar. Each program comes with a cassette, filmstrip and books. Especially useful with the billboard were the programs on:

Slot Car Racing

Drag Racing

Dune Buggy Racing

Motorcycle Racing

Drag Racing

} The kids loved these

Bowmar

Glendale, Calif. 91201

- 5) Checkered Flag Series. I believe you are familiar with these books.
- 6) I placed words on the blackboard that were related to racing. The students put them into alphabetical order.
- 7) The poster was a stimulating idea for creative writing. The kids wrote on "What I Would Do With A Car Like That" or "Why I Would/Wouldn't Want To Be A Race Car Driver." One person wrote on "Why I Would Love To Have That Poster." They sat or sprawled out on the floor below the poster while they were writing.
- 8) I had a few independent reports, also. One report dealt with the workings of a car engine, another with the Grand Prix races. Of course, they had to read to find out their information.
- 9) Fill in the vowels. I wrote up a story that had missing vowels.
Example:
R-c- Car F-n
I l-v- t- g- f-r a r-d- in my n-w r-c- c-r. I c-n
g- s- f-st; faster th-n -lmost -nyth-ng -ls-.
- 10) Racing car learning packets.

I don't expect the reader of this article is going to be able to get the Viceroy billboard posters (however, you might try). But there are other billboard posters that would turn your kids on. If you can't get billboard posters, how about some travel posters? We have used large posters of the cockpit of the 747 and Apollo XIII. The possibilities are only limited by a teacher's imagination. Keep your eyes open on rainy Monday mornings, you might see an idea. Teaching is fun if we stay creative.

There may be other ideas that we have used that would work for your kids that we could explore if you're interested:

film making

using film to teach comprehension and observation skills

making your own classroom newspaper or magazine

ideas from other visuals

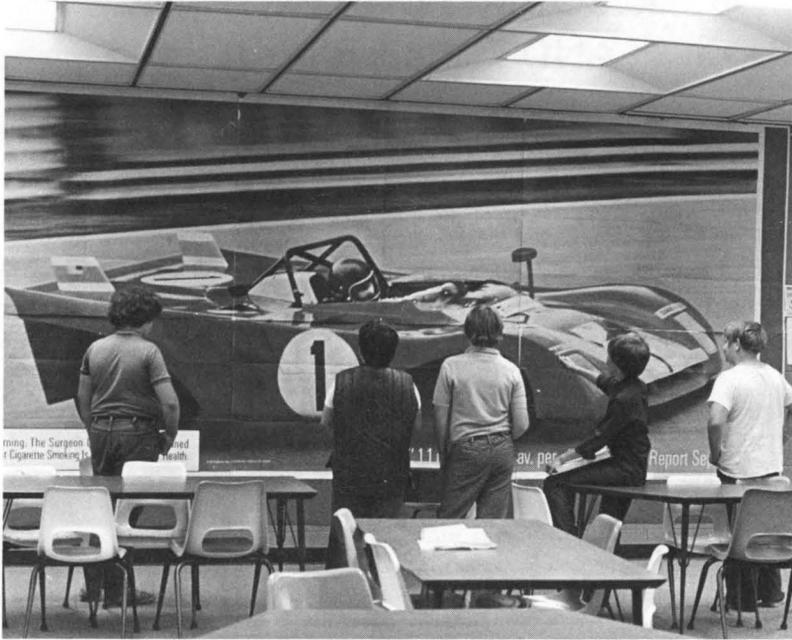
Let me know if you'd like more ideas.

Your friend,

Bob Hughes

A postscript . . . a final word of caution

It is so easy for the teacher to get caught up in the “gimmickry” of the motivating openers into the world of learning, that in all the excitement of newly involved kids (some of them for the first time ever,) the teacher loses sight of what it was all about. It was to involve kids in language. We want them to improve their reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking, and observation skills. But we also want them to learn to be better spellers, to write so they can communicate, to improve their word attack skills, and to increase comprehension. Be careful not to get caught up in a trap of gimmicks. We have a job to do.



Photographs by Aurelia Spengler