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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL:

Emotion as a Factor in Concentration

Kenneth VanderMeulen

A recent survey conducted to explore areas of problems in students' academic work brought out the fact that 92% of our young people indicated a difficulty in concentrating. One is struck by the high degree of unanimity in this matter. Some respondents make such revealing remarks as: "I can't remember what I have just read"; "My mind keeps going off the subject"; and, "It seems impossible for me to concentrate." Along with these confessions, one finds reasoning that searches for places to lay the blame, as: there is too much noise, the text is boring, the assignment was too confusing, studying can't be effective when the textbook is uninteresting. As many different ways of stating the problem as may be expressed, they all come down to one sad truth—merely keeping one's mind on a progression of thoughts in print has become a major academic problem.

It is especially noteworthy that so many of the students for whom concentration is a problem have a tendency to place the reason for the trouble on surrounding noises and on the "dullness" of the text. The myth that meaningless noise per se is a cause for failure to concentrate is a recurring one. And, in our haste to oversimplify the case, we may also say it is the television that has taught our children mental habits which operate against concentration. If indeed we were ever to invent an instrument that could ferret out all the causal factors in the problem of concentration-failure, we would undoubtedly find that each young person reacts to a highly individual set of factors, defying classroom or group treatment.

Probably the most commonly found causal factor would be one which cannot be altered by any treatment known; this is the attitude of modern Americans that paying close attention over an extended period of time is not worth the effort. Commercialism in American life dictates that mass media must produce and sell what is popular. It is not popular to sit and think. Games and pastimes which require mental power and sustained concentration do not make it on the entertainment market. The popular ingredients of entertainment are the exact antitheses of the attributes required for improving powers of concentration. Diversion, immediate gratification, rapidly changing

lights, color, and sound are much more easily accepted than the challenge of lengthy consideration of an intellectual problem. The Canadian writer John Buchan felt that our scatterbrain mentalities were the results of advertisers, who “make a frontal assault on our sensibilities.”

Thus, even when normally mature students assume an attitude of willingness and are prepared to expend the necessary effort to study their textbooks and assignments, their inability to focus their minds for an appreciable amount of time is most dismaying to teachers. Despite the good intentions of students, the results of all their work will add up to total discouragement, unless teachers can help them improve their powers of concentration. Development of concentration, after all, *is* possible; and may be a most gratifying outcome if the approach is made with some care.

Any consideration of concentration as an improvable reading skill must include discussion of the areas of factors which influence one's reading performance. The specific categories are as follows:

Physical—Without going into great technical detail about what constitutes the definition of the process of reading, we may say that reading is a physical act to the extent that we use our eyes and our nervous system. Our efficiency in reading can be altered by physical conditions that impede or hinder the process. Thus, pain, hunger, myopia, hearing loss, or extreme fatigue are some conditions which will influence reading performance.

Psychological—As intellectual progress or growth determines our ability to learn and retain for application, our emotional maturity tends to enhance or limit our willingness to use our intellectual ability. However, some of our past emotional reactions lie below the surface of our conscious mind, acting as a part of our mental content, influencing us without complete awareness on our part.

Environmental—This is probably the least important area of the three, since one can easily and simply alter the conditions of his immediate surroundings by physically removing himself to a place more conducive to study and thought. Yet this is the part given the most emphasis in the How-to-Study booklets, often repeating common-sense “rules” about one's desk, lighting, temperature, and the level of noise. It is not surprising that students fall into the habit of blaming the immediate surroundings for their inability to focus their minds on the order of ideas in the texts. Sometimes the teachers themselves succumb to student criticism of the style (or lack of it) in text writing, when what is really required is a brief unit devoted to an analysis of what comprises the skill of concentration.

Teachers of junior and senior high school students have to remind themselves periodically just how intensely personal the process of reading is. One might say we expose our ego-nerve each time we perform in reading. And while your class members may not now be aware of what heavy pressures were put upon them while they were learning to read, many still have very strong residual emotional reactions toward reading as young men and women. More parental, school, and peer pressure is put upon success in learning to read than in almost any field of human endeavor, save learning to speak—which is learned in relative privacy and with much more time allowed. Just as tight competition is often too much stress for children who haven't enjoyed adequate security of emotional support, performance in reading poses an awesome threat to young people who see it as an exposure of their personal inadequacies. Any failures the child may have incurred pose a threat to his emotional development in the earlier stages.

Thus reading *per se* may be regarded as an unpleasant experience for the high school student. He may have forgotten the reasons. And he may be equal to the level of the intellectual task in every respect. Yet the process of reading engenders an emotion which operates against effective interpretation and assimilation of what is read.

If we were to pursue the solution of this problem in a classroom where it is being effectively dealt with, we might hear the topic originally being discussed in Ms. Hunt's biology class, as follows:

"Ms. Hunt, aren't there writers of science texts who can make their stuff interesting? This book is really boring!"

"Yeah. Why don't we skip the book and do lab work?"

Ms. Hunt stops writing on the board and gives her full attention to the first speaker. "Now 'boring' and 'interesting' are both relative terms. Let me ask you, Paul, did you have trouble understanding what you read?"

"No, I guess not."

"Is it a matter of not having your purpose for reading in mind when you started?"

"Oh, I stated that on the study sheet. I was reading to find examples of symbiosis in nature."

"You may have touched upon a problem. Text writers are often experts, but not necessarily in writing. You had mastered the vocabulary in the section?"

"Yes, we covered that in class."

Ms. Hunt nods approval, and brings in the whole class, "Do some of the rest of you feel the same about the reading you do?" Various

class members describe their frequent difficulty in paying attention to printed pages, in all parts of their curricular texts.

While not attempting a crash course in the psychology of reading, Ms. Hunt briefly recounts the number of ways that feelings and intellect may come into conflict, giving students ample opportunity to ask questions, and making obvious her assumption that the class wants seriously to solve the problem.

Some of the members mildly protest that they think the text, not the reader, is the crux of the problem. Others say it is noise, being bothered by others, and possibly their own poor training in reading.

With each contribution, Ms. Hunt says she agrees that it may also be a factor. Finally, she makes what she calls an unofficial assignment. "Now, since the problem seems to exist for all of you in one course or another, I propose that you conduct a week long experiment. Each time that you intend to sit down to study for a certain period of time, keep a sheet of paper handy for a Concentration Log. As you study, jot down the source or nature of any distraction. Every single time you find yourself thinking about anything other than the subject of the assigned work, write that thought down."

"At first, this idea will seem hard to follow, because you'll be thinking about distractions so much of the time that you can't zero in on the subject at all. That is just a passing thing, however. All you need to remember is to be specific. And honest. Keep in mind that this is an experiment which helps you to analyze your habits of thought, to see yourself more clearly. No one is going to inspect your list.

"When you have listed some forty to fifty of these distractions, you need to put them into categories. You should classify them according to those three headings I told you about. Some will be physical; such as fatigue, or hunger, a cold, or headache. Some will be psychological; such as memories, anger, love, fear, shame, or elation. And some of the distractions you will have will be due to your surroundings; such as noise, heat, light, and persons interrupting you." Ms. Hunt pauses to wait for full attention.

"After you have completed the listing and categorizing, you should spend some time in thinking and reflecting on the list. Then, write a page or so to tell your reactions, findings, or observations about the list. What kind of distraction was most frequent in your case? We'll have another class discussion to decide on what the next steps are, after we've had some experience with this project."

In order to involve the reader in this matter, we are including here a list typical of those the students logged. The purpose is to examine the items of distraction on the unclassified list and decide what sort

of page of conclusions this student will write. Since such lists as the one below will constitute the basis for the class discussion to follow, the reader may readily predict what thoughts the students will reach about concentration.

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. looking for kleenex | 24. eyes burn—sleepy |
| 2. sorry about what I said | 25. get and open Coke |
| 3. hope get money soon | 26. sudden sad memory |
| 4. change radio station | 27. should write letter |
| 5. owe insurance—car | 28. thought about girl |
| 6. used bathroom | 29. looked at clock |
| 7. must find a job | 30. cleaning glasses |
| 8. digestive pain | 31. text seems confusing |
| 9. worry about health | 32. wished I dared phone |
| 10. can't seem to think | 33. can't see use of this |
| 11. receive phone call | 34. loud barking outside |
| 12. thought about grades | 35. friend comes into room |
| 13. yawning | 36. worry about grades |
| 14. wish I had more time | 37. met neat girl today |
| 15. should call M. | 38. made ink smudge on page |
| 16. annoyed at self | 39. dog next door yelping |
| 17. remembered joke | 40. silly radio commercial |
| 18. siren out on street | 41. noticed I was doodling |
| 19. no letter today | 42. upset by world news |
| 20. thought about date | 43. flickering fluorescent |
| 21. text is too tough | 44. noises on upper floor |
| 22. must ask parents | 45. this is a sloppy job |
| 23. another pmt. due! | |

As the young person who made the list above sought to classify his distractions into three categories, he finished with the items positioned as

	Physical	Psychological	Environmental
follows:	1, 6, 8, 24, 30	2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15 16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28 32, 33, 36, 37 41, 45	4, 11, 18, 21 25, 29, 31, 34, 35, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44

Why does Ms. Hunt take important time out of biology class to have her students conduct what can justifiably be described as an unscientific experiment? Three probable outcomes can be seen as distinctly beneficial to the participant. First, students who go through this self-study will invariably be impressed with the number of distractions which originate within the mind as opposed to environmental interruptions. Second, the exercise always leads to an increased ability to look at one's problems with a degree of objectivity rarely attained

through any other method of self-evaluation. Third, the discussion which Ms. Hunt refers to is an important means of releasing a number of previously repressed thoughts and ideas about emotions. It will provide a means for the teacher to talk about the dozen ways of establishing and maintaining good emotional health. It will be a chance for some students to learn how to rid themselves of anxieties that tend to block their logical thinking. Finally, it may be the long sought opportunity to air some pet peeves, fears, and phobias; possibly to allay them for good.