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# TEACHING READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

## "The Fine Art of Motivation"

*Kenneth VanderMeulen*

The most significant thing about motivation is that it is an intangible element in education. Its presence may only be sensed by the teacher. It does not come in units like ohms, ergs, decibels, or ounces. We're not even sure that its absence can be detected by objective measuring devices. Teachers, therefore, spend much less time studying and discussing motivation than they do in talking about programs, machines, testing instruments, and evaluation. The term *motivation* is frequently used by promotional representatives in describing an educational item on the market; the practice is much like the use of the term *fidelity* in a company name—it lends respectability to simple mercenary intentions.

Just what constitutes motivation needs some thought. Is it brought to the classroom in the heart of the student? Is the teacher charged with the responsibility of creating motivation where none existed? Can teachers even agree as to what it is and where it lives? Because reading teachers recognize the fact that motivation (or will-to-learn, or attitude) comprises a large fraction of improvement in reading, they *must* confront the matter of motive realistically.

Before the advent of the concept of learning to read as a continuous process, teachers tended to assume that students learned to read in elementary school. If reading problems developed, students might have been tutored, or simply regarded as having a poor attitude toward study. Teachers usually were inclined to associate lack of success in the classroom with emotional or behavioral problems, rather than reading deficiencies. Moreover, teachers thought of themselves as instructors in a discipline, and had the means for helping reading problems been present, they probably would not have been used. Teachers did not generally concern themselves with the process or the improvement of reading.

How has all that been changed since the advent of reading teachers in the secondary schools? During the past twenty-five years we have begun to see reading as the complex process it is. We know that reading consists of many skills, that it involves a multitude of factors—experience, emotion, environment, and physical health. We have begun to recognize reading as a highly sophisticated mental process

which requires a number of refined powers of abstraction and conceptualization.

In this age of scientific investigation, reading teachers have turned to scientists, requesting that they tell us more about the whole matter of reading. We have sought information and advice from the optometric experts, to learn more about what happens in the visual aspect of reading—to learn more about the optic nerve and muscular balance and binocular vision. We have questioned psychologists, and they have given us the benefit of guidance about learning: what helps or hinders memory, and what leads to retention of appropriate associations between symbol, sound, and idea.

In an age of professionalism, where being professional means to study what others have said or thought, teachers are encouraged to take graduate courses in education and related subjects. Study “in depth” replaces the survey courses, and many teachers eventually earn advanced degrees in one or another aspect of how to teach. They have become experts in the areas of methods, materials, procedures, testing, diagnosis, and reading programs.

In an age of technology, a host of devices and machines have been developed to help the reading teachers teach. With kits, programs, and systems, the salesmen enter our classrooms to bring us “advancement” in the modern mode. Whatever we need, they say, we can get for our students in a special electronic, computerized, programmed deal.

Finally, to add to our armament in attacking the impediments to reading progress, the National Reading Center in Washington has marshalled the forces of researchers and experimenters in the field of reading. Teachers may now have copies of all the conclusions and summaries of a thousand studies on what works in the areas of teaching developmental, corrective, and/or remedial reading.

Yet, to this moment, the same problems that have plagued secondary teachers through generations of efforts to help students read for meaning are still with us. The problem of failure to prepare the reading assignment is still there. The problem of the reluctant reader is with us yet. The problem of inattention to directions is still with us. Failure to concentrate, a problem which has grown in proportion to the complexity of our society, is with us. Despite the contributions of science, technology, professionalism, and governmental agency—high schools in the nation are being called holding patterns and pools of apathy.

The kinds of problems mentioned are motivational to a great

degree. They are not limited to any single area of the curriculum. However, motivation does *not* occupy over half of the attention in teachers' meetings. It seems that being openly concerned about lack of motivation in one's classes is like confessing an inadequacy. Many teachers do admit the sad truth to themselves; students frequently have to be coaxed and cajoled into expending the slightest effort in many secondary classes.

We should consider another factor or ingredient to the whole picture of classroom atmosphere which is related to motivation. This is the influence the teacher has upon the values and perceptions of the students. If we think of teaching as an art instead of a science, we may allow ourselves some reflection on the role of the teacher's personality and human-ness in the lives of the students. Take a few moments to think with me about the best teachers we ever had in our own school years. What were the characteristics and traits they possessed that made studying and learning a positive pleasure?

We may first remember great enthusiasm in the teachers we most admire. Enthusiasm for discovery, I submit, is the greatest lever of motivation in all of education. One does not have to be effusive; he needs only to be an example of willingness to learn, and belief in the efficacy of knowledge. Will James, the exemplar of enthusiasm said, "What we partly know already inspires us with a desire to know more." Maybe the word *inspiration* is too strong to be substituted for *motivation*. But, as we see less and less educational propellant within the students, we need to find and use more ways to stimulate, inspire, or inculcate a spirit for learning.

Was it the fact that they used better evaluation instruments than all the other teachers? Was it their vast knowledge about the particular subject in the curriculum that impressed? Was it their impeccable taste in bulletin board displays? Did they present the textbook assignments with 100% efficiency? No, we would have to admit, in every case it was the person himself who constituted the values we remember. One might be hard-pressed to name the exact approach or specific quality that created the fondness of memory for that teacher. We may even have forgotten appearance or voice pattern, but the impression of pleasant classroom atmosphere remains in our minds. What was that good feeling made of?

Since basic in each of us is that all important reality of self-concept, we doubtless remember a good teacher who made it possible for us to accept ourselves on better grounds than scores on papers. Whether we are reading or writing or conversing with others, we act strictly

in accordance with the well-developed picture of ourselves that people have helped us form since infancy. The picture of ourselves may even be thought of as a determiner of how much effort we will put forth on any job or assignment. We acted with great enthusiasm and vigor because we were taught to expect success and satisfaction as outcomes of our efforts.

Possibly the classroom of our earlier years especially deserving of accolades was the one in which the light touch of humor was generously applied. Puns and limericks have always been used with great effectiveness in all courses, often constituting the only tow-line in special reading classes. Since the English language is rich in ambiguities and irregularities, it is not difficult to flavor every vocabulary and reading lesson with beguiling jokes. Such riddles as “When is a door not a door?” (when it’s ajar) and “How are Christmas and a cat in the desert alike?” (sandy claws) cannot start too soon in the lives of readers.

Humor may not be teachable in the same manner that a body of knowledge is taught, but it has the same expanding and deepening effect on one’s mental content as reflection on experienced events would have. In addition, humor helps us toward a more flexible attitude of acceptance of human differences toward emotional maturity.

This is not to say that the teacher who brings a Bob Hope joke book to his classroom has instantaneously improved his personality. But it does claim that a classroom in which the teacher does not take himself too seriously is vastly more effective than the grave pedagogue and his tomblike atmosphere. In this respect we have come a long way. Look for a moment at this quote from *The New England Primer*, published 1816, page 26—

I in the burying place may see  
Graves shorter there than I;  
From Death’s arrest no age is free,  
Young children too may die.

We may also remember our best teacher as having taken a personal interest in us. As one looks back, he may remember the very moment and occasion when he realized that his reactions or feelings were of genuine concern to his teacher. Parents are of paramount significance in young people’s lives, but the discovery that one’s thoughts and talents matter greatly to other important adults is vital to the emerging personality. When one is able to say to himself, “What

I say or believe makes a lot of difference to grown-ups," he sees the need for responsible thinking.

This all may read like Mary Poppins' overweening optimism to the reader, to be rallied to the flag of sincerity and enthusiasm in a day of hard facts and frequent cynical incredulity. However, if we are discussing the motivation—the welfare and reading growth—of the secondary student, we must keep ourselves aware of all the elements that make up and pertain to this matter. Good reading programs are maintained by teachers who see the student as more important than administrative edicts, curricular requirements, window dressing, or well-oiled machinery. The relationship of the teacher to the student is where education is, and, as Frank G. Jennings puts it, "Education is a profoundly moral undertaking."