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ABSTRACT

Although educators have for a long time recognized that learning from what one reads involves more than just cognitive skills, little attention has been given to techniques for developing affective readiness for reading activities. Teachers have a responsibility to model affective readiness whenever the opportunity presents itself, as well as to assist students in developing their own affective readiness to learn. The basic steps in this process are understanding the concept of affective readiness, establishing relaxation, utilizing affirmations, and processing the affirmation statement through the affective domain. (Author/AA)

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AFFECTIVE READINESS TRAINING FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

By Deanna Coleman Martin
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"Learning to read" - "Reading to learn". Catchy phrases have a tendency to persist, especially when they represent meaningful ideas. Like popular allusions, certain phrases become a cryptic way of referring to an entire experience, setting off a chain reaction of thoughts and ideas. How often we have heard or read that one of the essential differences between teaching children reading at the elementary level and teaching reading at the secondary level is that for the student, emphasis shifts from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." While this is a catchy phrase and many would agree that it serves to remind us of some important ideas, what I would like for you to consider is the rather "circular" nature of that statement.

Reading is a process that we must learn like many others, but it is one of the few skills that we master as a specific tool for learning. Students at the secondary level, and especially students at the post secondary level, rely heavily upon their ability to learn from what they read. As educators, we have recognized for a long time that learning from what one reads involves more than what we typically refer to as the cognitive domain. It is not just a matter of a student's

knowledge or intellectual abilities, nor for our part, a matter of matching readers with materials written at the appropriate level. We have seen mature readers struggle in their efforts to remember the very basic information in an average reading assignment. On the other hand, we have watched less skilled readers be totally absorbed in books that we know, diagnostically, are frustrating. In such cases, the mature reader finds reading to learn very tedious while his counterpart not only gains the information but seems to enjoy the endeavor.

Skills aside, perhaps it would be helpful to think about these two examples in terms of reading readiness - an integral part of the process of reading to learn.

Teachers are often introduced to the concept of reading readiness through the early writings of William S. Gray (1925) and later through readiness activities such as the initial step in Emmett Betts' Directed Reading Activity (1950), Russell Stauffer's Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (1967), and David Shephard's adaptation of the DRTA to secondary reading (1973). Implicit in the explanations of the readiness process is what we might refer to as affective readiness. Emmett Betts alludes to the importance of students being "pepped up" to read and emphasizes that interest should be stimulated. Gray makes the point that internal thoughts and external activities are both important and that prior experiences are used to modify further happenings. Stauffer reminds us that readiness is an ongoing process - not a level of achievement and includes as overriding characteristics, "feelings of security and adequacy", "understanding self and others", and "constructive attitudes toward change." Shepherd also mentions such ideas as arousing interest and "giving awareness".

Although affective considerations are repeatedly emphasized, we find, upon analysis, that the suggested readiness activities are largely based upon cognitive tasks. For example, teachers are asked to prepare students to read through such means as discussing background information that might be pertinent to understanding the selection. Whenever possible, such exploration should be interwoven with the student's own experiences in order to facilitate his understanding and, hopefully, stimulate his interest. Audio-visual aids may be introduced, key terms discussed, a speaker invited for the occasion, etc. In short, the effectiveness of the readiness activities seem to be based upon the premise that if the teacher does a respectable job of promoting cognitive readiness, the student will be affectively ready as well. In order to evaluate this assumption, perhaps we should consider the nature of this aspect of readiness and its application to learning.

Affective readiness, like the affective domain, involves such things as feelings and values; for example, how the student <u>feels</u> about doing the assignment, how he <u>feels</u> about the teacher who assigned it, to what extent he <u>values</u> the information he's been asked to learn, and central to affective readiness, how he <u>perceives</u> himself as a learner in general, and specifically in relation to the task at hand.

As a general rule, kindergarten teachers and elementary teachers in the early grades are actively concerned about the way their students feel. They are constantly inventing ways to make learning experiences enjoyable. They are careful to protect sensitive egos, to praise initial efforts, to reduce frustration whenever possible and to provide an ample measure of support and reinforcement. But somehow, as children get older, such attention to affective matters begins to wane.

Without trying to explain why such shifts occur, let us note that students often assume that the real reason they do assignments is because the teacher said to and, if they don't, a price must be paid at school and later, at home.

It is not altogether a joke that, when asked, so many students reply that recess is their favorite subject. We all smile at such retorts, often responding with "O.K., what what really is your favorite subject?" If pushed, the student might say "reading, math or social studies", but more often he'll opt for gym, music or art - areas which are intellectually less demanding and considerably more relaxed and action-oriented. Such areas in our curriculum also gain popularity because students feel more competent in terms of their ability to perform. Here individual differences are readily accepted and effort counts nearly as much as actual performance. Students are less likely to feel anxious about engaging in new activities since "mistakes" in gym or music are not reviewed with the same scrutiny as "mistakes" in reading or math. If they were, we would soon find less enthusiastic participants. In other words, students have positive feelings and attitudes towards learning experiences that are structured for success. They are affectively ready for such learning.

All of this is not to say that the onus of responsibility for such readiness lies solely with the teacher. Quite the contrary - while the teacher is extremely important - especially as a model for such readiness, the learner, particularly as he approaches adolescence and adulthood, must seek and find his own source of learning power.

Older students who have difficulty in content area classes are most frequently told to study harder - to buckle down. If only they

would read their assignments more carefully, do all their homework, and pay closer attention in class, they would make respectable grades. No doubt that this is usually true, for it is well established that the more often a student manipulates a set of facts, the better his chances will be for remembering them. Over a period of time, it helps to listen to a concept, read about it, write it down, discuss it with someone else and ponder it. We've even graphed learning curves in an effort to help students understand the importance of such spaced and periodic study. However, what we fail to discuss with students is the very real occurrence of "one-shot" learning.

All of us have had the experience of reading a particular book or listening to a charismatic lecturer that so thoroughly stimulated us we never forgot the concept being discussed. We use special words to describe this kind of experience. We say we were "spellbound", "absorbed", "riveted", "gripped", "glued", "enchanted", or "turned on". Instead of being conscious of the time and effort involved, we say "the time just flew".

When we have such an experience, the affective as well as the cognitive domain is actively engaged; we can feel the excitement and the energy flow. In fact, it may not be an exaggeration to propose that the affective domain houses 50% of a student's power to learn. Granted, cognitively a person must be ready to understand certain facts and concepts - that is basic. But given this, the affective domain, or what the student is feeling during the time he is trying to process information, is pivotal. If he is ready for the information, values it, is confident of his learning ability, and wants to absorb the information, he is operating, in a practical sense, at 100% power. He is actively utilizing both his cognitive and affective domains in a positive way.

If however, he finds himself watching the clock, counting the minutes or the number of pages he has left, and anticipating what he's going to do after he's finished, he is, at best, utilizing about 50% of his power. We might say his affective domain is in neutral. If, on the other hand, he is telling himself such things as "I don't like this course; I can't stand that teacher!, I don't want to do this assignment; I'm bored; I'm confused; I'm never going to get this" - he has reduced his learning potential considerably. The expression that you get what you expect is particularly appropriate when considering "self talk" during periods of learning. This is true not only in times of trying to master material, but it also applies to producing such material on a test.

I once had a college student who came to me about a problem he was having in Chemistry. He told me that he understood the lecture, made good grades on the class assignment but "froze" during tests. He began getting nervous a full week prior to his Chemistry exams, and even though he studied diligently, when it came time to sit down and produce the information, he was so anxious that he just couldn't remember all those steps and formulas. During our conversation, I learned that his study habits were good, he enjoyed school in general, and he carried a B average in his other classes. I also learned that he considered himself an exceptional tennis player. Pursuing this seemingly unrelated topic, I asked him if he ever played with anyone that was his equal on the court. He told me that there was one young man he played almost every week that he had to be at his best to beat. I then requested him to tell me what kinds of things he did that helped him get ready to give his best effort. He replied that his most effective strategy was to "psyche himself up". He explained, "I tell myself all sorts of things - like on my worst day,

I'm better than he is, and today I'm going to play so brilliantly that I will embarrass him right off the court. Any balls that he can hit, I can return..." and so on. As he talked, the anxiousness that brought him into my office began to disappear and by the time he finished, both of us were convinced that his opponent had a rough afternoon awaiting him.

I then asked him a relevent question: what would happen if he played this person with the same "mind set" he used in taking his Chemistry exams - could he beat him? He didn't answer. He just sat there and smiled. That moment of realization became the basis for our work.

The power to produce one's best effort comes from the same available source, whether one is playing an exceptional game of tennis, impressing a perspective employer, creating a beautiful work of art, or mastering a chapter in Biology. The problem is not one of availability, but rather one of benign neglect. We tap this inner source automatically when we engage in activities we enjoy. And, we know to bring it into expression when we are faced with a situation that demands the most we have to offer. But for many of us and most of our students as well, we often wait for some outside force to act as the catalyst... the charismatic teacher, the well-written book, the good friend to help us, or, on the other side, the realization that the report is due tomorrow or the grant has an April 1 deadline. How often do we all use the excuse "I need to do it, but I'm just not in the mood,"and await the "urge to hit us", as if some outside agent will push the magic button that stirs us into action. To be sure, this is part of our human nature, but we must remember that each individual possesses this power as his birth right; it is at his disposal anytime, any place. It now becomes a matter of one's accepting the responsibility for his own moods, his own self talk, his own level of interest and performance.

If Jacob Rotter had taught us taught us anything in his research, on locus of control, it is that the student who takes his cues from inside himself and feels that he is in control of his own fate profits more from his education than one who feels as though there is little he can do to improve his lot. More and more, literature in psychology and counseling is emphasizing the need to place the responsibility for good mental health squarely in the hands of the individual seeking guidance. Transactional Analysis(James, Jongward, 1971), Rational Behavior Training(Maultsby, 1970), and Reality Therapy(Glasser), all relatively new counseling techniques, have one major theme in common: each proposes to make the client his own therapist, that is by helping him to acquire the skills he needs for self analysis and self understanding, the client can begin to solve his own problems. Even the present popularity of courses in transcendental meditation, yoga, relaxation and various mind control techniques alert us to the growing need people feel to take control of their lives and find an inner source of power and peace. All of these things point to a new level of awareness which may not only affect our personal living but can be used to improve the quality of education that students receive.

The application of such awareness to education is wide. Therefore, let's concern ourselves with what we as teachers of reading, particularly at the secondary and post-secondary levels, can do to improve our students' abilities to learn from what they read. We do have an obligation to model affective readiness whenever the opportunity presents itself. We can think of times that we were very successful in motivating a class to learn an important concept or read a certain selection. We enjoyed the time we spent with the students and they enjoyed it, too. The lesson went well; everything clicked; affective readiness was established and

operating. But there are many more times that students have to read on their own, without our physical presence or support. Often these periods of effort are less productive. Students frequently complain that they don't seem to get much out of their reading, or that they constantly find themselves at the bottom of the page, knowing full well that their eyes have passed by every word, but unable to remember a single fact.

If, in the questioning process, it can be established that the major problem appears to be the student's level of affective readiness, share with him the following ideas:

1. Understanding the Concept - Remind him of the importance that attitude plays in all areas of endeavor. Help him recapture the feeling of enthusiasm that is present when he's learning something he really enjoys and remind him that he controls those feelings and he can generate a similar affective state whenever he chooses.

2. Establishing Relaxation - Tell him to begin by using relaxation. If he's familiar with TM or Yoga or any one of the various techniques available, encourage him to use whatever he knows. If it becomes necessary to offer a method, here is one that is easy to teach for anyone who has a background in the kinds of phrases one uses to promote relaxation: Suggest that he begin by placing himself in a quiet, comfortable place - hands resting at his side, legs uncrossed, and feet on the floor. If at all possible, lead him through the exercise. Tell him to take a deep breath and on the exhale, concentrate on relaxing everything about his head - eyes closed, forehead relaxed, lips apart, neck muscles relaxed. On the exhale of the next breath, focus his attention on relaxing his shoulders and arms. With the next deep breath, he should think about his hands - they are relaxed now and warm. The next area of concentration should be the chest and stomach. Continue along these

lines, instructing him to relax with each exhale, until he has focused his attention on all the major sections of his body.

A variety of images and exercises can be used to facilitate the experience. Two resources that are particularly helpful are the tapes by either Arnold Lazarus or Emmett Miller. Lazarus focuses attention upon muscle relaxation and Miller uses visual images to attain similar results. Such tapes provide a useful means of immediate training for those who would not feel comfortable in undertaking such instruction themselves.

3. Utilizing Affirmation - When the student is thoroughly relaxed and comfortable, he should think about his assignment and design an affirmation statement that he feels would be helpful in getting him ready to learn. An affirmation is a statement of an affirmative or positive nature that helps the learner internalize a useful idea or attitude. It should be based upon a concept that the student feels to be both practical and possible.

What students have said they use varies widely, but here's an example that many students have found useful. "I am thankful for the fact that I can read this assignment, understand it, and remember what I've read." One student remarked, "The first time I tried that, the little voice inside my head said, 'Who do you think you are trying to kid?'". This is not an unusual response, especially if the student is having difficulty with the material. Persistence, at this point, is the key, for it is not just a matter of positive thinking. That is only the first step. The student must process the statement through the affective domain as well.

Upon first consideration, it may seem strange to suggest to students that they begin an affirmation with a phrase like "I am thankful", but

there is a good reason for such a beginning. If students were to say to themselves "I have the ability" to do such and such, they might only think the thought. The whole purpose behind using affirmations is to involve the feeling nature. The insertion of words like thankful, grateful, or appreciate can be used to elicit a positive emotional response. By definition, they describe something one feels, thus adding an affective dimension to the statement.

It is sometimes difficult to explain to a student how he can know when he's reached a desired affective state, but the statement I find useful to say is as follows: "When the feeling runs through you like a good piece of music, then you know you've got it." Most students seem to be able to relate to that analogy.

When he has completed this step, he is ready to begin the assignment. If the old feelings of frustration begin to arise, he is to stop what he's doing, relax if he needs to and use an affirmation statement again. At this point, the student may elect to tailor the statement to his particular need at the moment.

This, then, is the basic paradigm for assisting students in developing their own affective readiness for reading to learn. Again, the basic steps consist of understanding the concept, establishing relaxation, utilizing affirmations, and processing the affirmation statement through the affective domain.

It would be misleading to say that everyone can use this strategy. Some students resist any type of effort which calls for personal involvement; i.e. they have a low tolerance for risk-taking. Others derive too much pleasure from their negative self talk to abandon it. However, the students who do practice it report that they learn in less time, make better grades on their tests, and actually enjoy the experience.

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