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Making Reading so “Useful” it Sticks

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Making Reading so “Useful” it Sticks

Author Biography
Dr. Sarah Tanner-Anderson serves as Assistant Professor and Program Director of Educational Leadership. A former principal, assistant principal, middle- and high-school English teacher, department and grade-level chair, high-school coach, and club sponsor, Dr. Tanner-Anderson has spent the past fifteen years serving and supporting public education in the Commonwealth. A twice Longwood alumna, Dr. Tanner-Anderson obtained her Bachelor of Arts in English ('02) and Master of Arts in English, Education, and Writing ('07) from Longwood University. She earned her Post Master’s Administrative Certification ('11) and Doctor of Education in Educational Administration and Policy Studies ('14) from The George Washington University. Her research interests include women's educational leadership, social justice, and literacy. Dr. Tanner-Anderson has previously published in the Virginia English Journal and the VASCD Journal and is a proud Past-President of VATE.

Abstract
In the English language arts classroom, students must not only understand and appreciate the value of reading, writing, and speaking, but they must also learn, employ, and hone these skills for use as contributing members of their current and future societies. Our task, then, is to make learning so “useful” that it sticks— to build a strong foundation of literacy that may continue to expand as students’ life experiences provide more depth and relevance to their work. For reading, specifically, we must both encourage and support interest, stamina, and understanding of the texts we explore, which is no small feat considering students often want to know, “What’s in it for me?” To answer their driving question, we have to sell the “usefulness” of their learning. When learning is “useful,” students are motivated. And, when students are motivated, learning sticks.

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Let’s face it. Our students are not vessels into which we pour buckets of sacred knowledge. Students are more like the harshest culinary critic, discerning what is palatable and ingesting what is valuable. Student engagement, then, hinges on whether or not a student finds the information relevant, interesting, and useful.

English language arts educators have the large charge of teaching literacy—a topic which elicits arm-stretching, wide-mouthed yawns from our students. Yet these are arguably the most “useful” tools they will ever learn, preparing students for reading, writing, and speaking in the world beyond their classroom desks. How, then, can we motivate students with literacy learning that they find not just palatable, but delectable? How can we engage students to make their learning not only compulsory, but also valuable? And, how might we have fun in the process?

In the English language arts classroom, students must not only understand the value of reading, writing, and speaking, but also develop these skills for use as contributing members of society. Our task, then, is to make learning so “useful” that it sticks—to build a strong foundation of literacy that may continue to expand as students’ life experiences provide more relevance to their work. For reading, specifically, we must support fuller engagement with the texts we explore, which is no small feat considering students often want to know, “What’s in it for me?” To answer their question, we have to articulate the “usefulness” of their learning. When learning is “useful,” students are motivated. And, when students are motivated, learning sticks.

The “Usefulness” of Reading

Adults know how important reading is to our everyday life. From cell phone and mortgage contracts to life insurance agreements, we know that reading—careful, informed reading—is not just useful but necessary for success in the world. Here’s the thing: students
don’t know that. They have no experience with high-stakes, impact-your-life-and-money-and-wellbeing kind of reading. The only high-stakes reading they have encountered is the intensive, multiple-choice testing they have taken for the duration of their school careers. They don’t see reading as useful; rather, they see reading as a painfully methodical approach to answering “B” on their quarterly benchmark assessments. Of course they are disengaged! How, then, might educators inspire deeper, more connected relationships with reading that moves students beyond a page, an answer, and a feeling of disappointment?

**Accessibility**

First, we must make reading accessible. Research suggests that access to texts, especially at an early age, promotes a culture of literacy learning that spans the course of a lifetime; in fact, “if there is little to read in your house, you are less likely to read” (Fisher & Frey, 2018, p. 91). Although we cannot necessarily change the landscape of literacy within our students’ homes, we can control it in our buildings. Extending the opportunity for literacy is the first step; motivating students to explore, develop, and enjoy reading follows thereafter.

Students need access to what they can successfully consume. Hall (2016) suggests that “students’ experiences with reading are not simply situated inside learning and enacting a specific set of skills. Rather, they are situated inside the social and cultural contexts of classrooms, which include their histories in school and with teachers, texts, reading instruction, and their classmates” (p. 341). We must take into consideration how students feel about reading to best provide them with texts that excite rather than bore, engage rather than disconnect, and encourage rather than disappoint.

To accomplish this, diverse texts should be readily available and offered in formats and levels that students can both consume and enjoy, balancing challenge with support for all reading
levels. Our classroom collections and school libraries should contain a variety of titles, levels, genres, and content to build and sustain an interest in learning within and beyond the classroom. Students should also connect with each other beyond the page to deepen both textual and social understandings as a community of readers. To this point, Comer, Woods, and Grant (2017) suggest that “providing children and young people with the opportunity to learn literacy as a multimodal and collective practice is likewise an equity issue” as “the futures that children are heading toward will require them to use and produce texts across a variety of modes, drawing on a full range of materials, tools, and resources, including other people, if they are to be successfully literate” (p. 116). Helping students understand and appreciate the “usefulness” of reading thus starts by providing accessible texts and opportunities for textual and social connections.

Relevancy

Likewise, we must make reading relevant. We have all heard (and perhaps have even said ourselves), “When am I ever going to use this?” If students can find the value in what they are reading, they may be more willing to engage on the page. This isn’t a new concept, of course, as thirty-five years ago, Scholes (1985) asserted “we must stop ‘teaching literature’ and start ‘studying texts’” and that those “textual studies must be pushed beyond the discrete boundaries of the page and the book into the institutional practices and social structures that can themselves be usefully studied as codes and texts” (pp. 16–17). If we know this, why do students sit in so many classrooms across our nation receiving information instead of engaging with texts? Albrecht and Karabenick (2018) noted that “helping students comprehend meaningful connections between what they do and learn in school and the issues that concern them in their
everyday lives should promote academic motivation and achievement” (p. 8). Arguably, students remain disengaged because the texts are not relevant to their lives, circumstances, or aspirations.

One way to promote relevancy is selecting texts that speak to the heart of students’ experience or help students better understand local or global issues. Many seminal works, although valuable to educators and certainly important to teach, lack any current connection to our students’ experiences (Bull, 2012; Tatum, 2008). This does not mean that you have to discard the classics. Rather, take some time to research similar, more current titles that might complement thematic connections and promote a deeper understanding and appreciation for those works. Beyond this, educators in the English language arts classroom have a tremendous opportunity to explore social justice themes more deeply through texts (Brauer, 2018; Tatum 2008). By pinpointing hot topics of global, national, or local interest—a list perhaps even generated by students—reading expands beyond what students must read into what students want to read. Helping students become informed readers with contributing voices not only benefits academia, but also benefits society as a whole. Pretty “useful,” indeed!

**Strategies for Engagement**

Once we have made reading accessible and relevant, what’s next? We must tap into students’ energy to make reading fun! Structured opportunities for “fun” reading that get students out of their seats and into the page promote “usefulness” in students’ learning.

**Readers theater.** One great way to engage students with texts is through readers theater. First, choose a story that can easily be divided into parts, characters, or dialogue. Assign each student a part for which they are responsible to both read and act. To practice, allow students to read their parts orally and provide feedback. Then have students perform their assigned parts to an audience—peer, small group, class, or larger group. Killeen (2014) indicates this approach is
often “met with enthusiasm and interest from both reluctant and advanced readers” because “there is nothing like the draw of the stage and the recognition that comes from performing” (p. 59). Readers theater is not only fun, but also promotes fluency, builds confidence in reading, and reinforces elements of expression (Young, Stokes, and Rasinski, 2017, p. 351). A number of free resources, including scripts, are readily available online, many of which are aligned to state standards.

**Gallery walks.** Another out-of-your-seat option is utilizing gallery walks. Gallery walks allow students to explore multiple texts displayed around a room or down a hallway. Often, these walks are guided by questions that deepen understanding of a text, quote, or image. Like readers theater, you must first choose an appropriate text, ensuring the length does not impede students’ ability to quickly and thoroughly read for content, context, and understanding. Then, display the texts either around the room or down a hallway where students may visit, either individually or in small groups, without overcrowding. Students should have a purpose for their analysis, so it is important to identify the task—should students analyze a specific literary element? Or, perhaps, should they identify thematic similarities or differences? Whatever the charge, students must have a prescribed purpose to promote the “usefulness” of the activity.

**Investigative inquiry.** Why not expand reading outside of the building? Through investigative inquiry, students can take their reading beyond the written word and explore a concept, theme, or genre in action. For instance, if you want students to more tangibly understand the power, beauty, or uncertainty expressed by poet-naturalists, assign an investigative project that requires an element of outdoor observation, perhaps incorporating journaling, sketching, or photography to document the inquiry process. Experiencing the word,
rather than passively receiving the word, makes reading much more “useful” and, subsequently, sticky.

**Community connections.** Yet perhaps the most “useful” learning of all is the kind that transfers to practice. Activities that charge students with analyzing and participating in their community provide rich, real-world connections between text and life. For instance, if students read a text that discussed the court system, arrange for students to visit the local courthouse. Assign an interview project, speaking with a court official or representative to learn more about how elements of the text translate to real-life consequences in the legal system. Or, perhaps, if students read a text about war, connect with local veterans and veteran organizations as a powerful way to deepen their understanding of their reading through comparable or conflicting stories from service. There are many ways to incorporate meaningful connections, and doing so will provide students with “useful” opportunities to see their reading come to life in their own communities.

Readers theater, gallery walks, investigative inquiry, and community connections are just a few strategies to promote reading engagement. This is by no means an exhaustive list of activities, but rather a springboard to consider what ways you might incorporate engaging, out-of-your-seat reading interactions for your students. Consider reaching out to your colleagues, too, for opportunities to connect through cross-curricular explorations!

**Conclusion**

Today, our students want to know: “What’s in it for me?” We should be able to retort, “What isn’t?!” Building an appreciation of reading as a “useful” life skill is not only important—it is imperative. To do so, English language arts educators must provide accessible, relevant texts
with opportunities to engage with reading beyond the page. We have to make it so “useful” that it sticks.
References


