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Reading in Middle and Secondary School

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### My Philosophy of Reading

Students of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are inundated with complex ethical problems and questions posed by a society that is moving into the future at an unprecedented pace. In order to be participating citizens of this ever-changing world, it is necessary for all people to be able to read. People from every socioeconomic level need to be able to make decisions for themselves; therefore, they must be informed about politics, careers, or personal economic issues. Additionally, reading has its practical purposes; people need to read in order to fill out job applications and to understand the “fine lines” of contracts or other important documents. Also, people who are in school or who choose to attend an institution of higher education must be able to read well in academic settings in order to increase their knowledge base. Whatever the reason, this ability to read is of the utmost importance. I believe that reading is the most important educational skill that needs to be learned throughout one’s public/private school experience and continue throughout a lifetime. Reading is like playing a musical instrument. It is not something that is mastered at a certain age. Rather, it is a skill that continues to improve through practice.

In addition to reading for practical purposes, people should read for pleasure and to employ their underused imaginations. In this age of the ever-present television and Nintendo, I believe it vital to read in order to expand knowledge and experience events or situations that have been created within the personal confines of one’s mind. As a pre-service English teacher, I am committed to making sure that all of my students are able to

read or be striving to read on a functional level by the time they leave my classroom. It is my sincere wish that students in my English class will develop a love of reading and writing that will carry them through the rest of their lives. I believe that the reading done in the English classroom has the potential to act as a crucible where students can ponder difficult questions and can embark on meaningful explorations of the human condition. Then, these young learners will possess a broader understanding of where humanity has been and therefore, have a better idea of where it should be going. As they learn to ask appropriate questions with open minds, I hope to instill a desire to solve the quandaries of their generation through individual and collective experience and to encourage these students to employ these solutions by participating fully in their communities on local and national levels.

I believe that the act of reading is the transaction between the text and the reader. The outcome of this interaction is constructed knowledge. This new construction may be added to pre-existing schemata. It may be a new concept that can be added to an individual's existing knowledge framework that was created via previous life and educational experiences. Reading can be as simple as a 5 year old girl realizing that the letters D-U-C-K represent the little feathered animal with an orange beak that she saw at the park last week or as complicated as a English professor formulating a critical feminist interpretation of Kate Chopin's The Awakening. Simply put, meaning of a text is completely defined by the individual reader.

Becoming a skilled reader is a journey that involves many steps. Strengthening any one element yields small gains. For large gains, many elements must be in place. These elements, known as cuing systems, provide a means for the reader to comprehend

the text. Cuing systems work like cue balls on a pool table. When I play pool, I use the cue ball to break apart the billiards on the table. This cue ball is a tool that helps me to break apart the balls into a manageable situation in which I can have better opportunities to sink the billiards into the table pockets in order to win the game. Reading cueing systems work in a similar fashion. The graphophonic system provides its reader with the ability to sound out the words or recognize the collection of letters at first sight. Strengthening this cuing system with the study of phonics and sight words will increase the readers' abilities to make meaning from the text. The syntactic cuing system helps the reader make meaning through knowledge of grammar and syntax. If this cuing system is strengthened, the reader will be able to organize information they are reading into a more easily recognizable format. The final and most important cuing system consists of semantics. These cues help the reader to relate their experience with language as they read the text on the printed page. If known concepts are presented with some unknown concepts to a developing reader, the semantic system will be used to help the child relate the previous knowledge to the new information. Ensuring that previous knowledge is activated before new material is presented can strengthen the effectiveness of this cueing system. It is important to note that these three systems work together. There is not one system that is more important than another. For this reason, I believe that the current trend of an overemphasis of phonics training will lead to future problems with comprehension. A balanced approach to reading that emphasizes whole language activities will help children to become better readers.

Because these cuing systems are integral to reading activity, I believe that readers must be active participants in the reading process. Reading engages the whole mind. One

cannot be passive about the activity or it is a waste of time. True comprehension cannot be obtained through transmission from teacher to student, from podium to notebook to memory. I believe, in order for reading to happen, learners must have the opportunity to experience meaningful and appropriate information in which they can raise their own questions and construct their own approaches to comprehension. However, people need to learn **for** themselves but should not learn **by** themselves. They must experience a problem or issue in text; then, they must interact with their community in order to understand the world. A carefully constructed classroom with well-facilitated learning activities is one of the best places for this process to happen.

This type of engagement is very individualistic and can be comprised of many different things—perhaps as many ways as there are individual paths to comprehension. For example, I like to take notes while I am reading. This keeps me focused on the text. Another reading strategy consists of giving the reader a meaningful purpose to his/her reading experience. For example, if I know that my class will be taking a field trip to a Civil War battlefield, I could find some articles about that location and assign groups to read the article and make a list of things that they find interesting about the article that they could further research during the field trip on site. Later, they would give an oral presentation to their classmates. This would give a higher purpose to a reading activity. The students would be reading, learning about history, engaging in social interaction with their peers, and using some higher critical processes in order to get the assignment completed.

I believe that reading should be stressed in all subject areas: science, math, language arts, music, physical education, history, civics, economics, computer skills, and

art are all an important part of a student's education. For example, reading skills could be emphasized in science class when the biography of a scientist Joseph Priestly, the man who "discovered oxygen" is read before a study of the properties of gasses. A math lesson on symmetry could be taught in conjunction with the diary reading of M.C. Escher in which he expresses his philosophy on the integration of math and art. No matter what subject is taught, each instructor's long term goal should be to develop thinking, problem solving, critical thinking, and study skills that will equip students for a lifetime of self-directed learning. Of course, reading is an essential part of all of these activities.

I believe that reading is a more valuable source of information and entertainment than that of watching TV or a movie. Reading is different from these sources for several reasons. Most importantly, a reader must use their imagination or other parts of one's intellectual capabilities in order to understand what he/she is trying to comprehend. The ability to think and imagine is something that makes humanity unique in the universe. If a person is watching something on television, usually, there is no imagination needed to understand what is being watched. Without reading, peoples' minds become lazy and, since information is handed to them on a plate, ready-made, they do not think for themselves. Another reason to read about a subject rather than watching a news program about it on television is the matter of bias. Of course, the author of a book or story has a point of view, but the reader needs to contend with only one person's bias; whereas, when one is watching TV, there are countless hands that have been involved with the production of the show. A logical conclusion to this fact is with countless hands come countless points of view. I think that reading is a more reliable way to internalize information and explore new areas of thought or philosophy.

The question of how to make students life long readers seems to hinge on one factor: personal freedom of choice while in high school. Dr. Sherrill's research in Voices of Readers demonstrates that, in person after person, if they were given material options in their English classes, they testified that they enjoyed reading as an adult. Her book indicates that people's attitudes toward reading can change dramatically, for the good or for the bad, during the time spent in high school English class. In addition to having an enthusiastic teacher, students seemed to gain something from having some freedom within a classroom setting to choose what they want to read. Also, they indicated that they appreciated time to read in class and like to have teachers read aloud. In my opinion, it is a huge responsibility to have the power to potentially make or break someone's love of reading. However, if they can have some power in choosing, it might create a spark to ignite reading that is done outside of class. Of course, classroom curriculum flexibility is becoming less common due to the onslaught of standardized test preparation that appears to control in many classrooms.

Another form of assessment that is perhaps more valuable are reading proficiency tests. In my experience, these tests are only one part of an assessment. A student's reading proficiency must be tested with a standardized test in addition to a concurrent interview assessment, writing samples, and miscue analysis as well as sufficient classroom observation in order to assess the student's true reading ability. I think that a thoughtful teacher's opinion about a student's reading level that is based on observation and experience in addition to the results of a standardized test is the most accurate means of determining reading proficiencies of students.

Reading is a constantly changing activity—there are no two books alike or two individuals who read in the same way. For a reader, everyday should bring new challenges and new opportunities for growth. As a teacher, I hope to create a life long love of literature in my students as I continue to shape my own understanding of the world through what I read.