

New Knowledge about Reading

You can think about Tiger Woods becoming a golfer, Wynston Marsalis becoming a musician or Meryl Streep becoming an actress. You can look at world class skiers, skaters, chefs, artists, fishermen, chess players, designers and inventors. You can examine yourself and others in your life enjoying what it is you love to do and have learned to do well. You will begin to see a set of common conditions to define how we learn to become good at something. These conditions are also relevant for educators as they help young children become language users, readers and writers. In his classic research observing young children as they learned language, Brian Cambourne first identified these eight key conditions for language learning: immersion, demonstrations, expectations, practice, approximations, response and responsibility, and engagement. Let's consider how these conditions apply specifically to reading instruction.

Is your goal teaching someone to learn to read or teaching someone to become a reader? The first of these views sees reading as a specific skill that needs to be taught. The second view sees reading as a disposition or habit -- a relatively enduring tendency to act in a certain way. It is not taught so much as it is learned. It is something about which we are always learning. And the conditions for learning to become a reader mirror the conditions we have identified as significant contributors to learning about any activity.

To become a reader it helps to be immersed in an environment in which one has easy access to books and other printed materials. It helps to have a special place one can go to that provides a comfortable, enjoyable reading experience. It helps to be surrounded by others that have made reading a valued part of their lives -- they set an example by reading a variety of materials, reading frequently, talking about what they have read and encouraging others to read. Reading programs that focus on immersing children in print and assisting communities and families to do the same will probably create more readers than those that do not.

While immersion and access are critical conditions for learning to becoming readers and writers, in and of themselves they are not guarantees for learning. Children become better readers and writers by working with experts. Exemplary teachers with the greatest impact on the reading and writing performances of their students are consummate at their use of explicit instruction through modeling and demonstrating. They let the less-skilled in on the insider information they have in their heads. Reading programs in which teachers and other adult supporters are prepared to effectively integrate appropriate focused lessons on specific aspects of the reading and writing processes and then carry out those lessons frequently during classroom instruction are more likely to create readers and writers than those programs without evidence of that.

Research also reveals that exemplary teachers who have the greatest impact on the reading writing performances of their students have high expectations for their students. They see all their students as readers and writers and they work to have their students see themselves in a similar way. They are unwilling to marginalize a student's potential because of conditions that exist outside of their classrooms. One study suggested that a student's perception of him or herself as a reader and writer may have more to do with one's ultimate success, than one's initial abilities. In other words, as long as young children see themselves as potential readers and writers, they will probably continue to stay engaged in the learning process. Once children are convinced that reading and writing are not something that they do well, they seem to not only begin to turn away from reading and writing but also school itself.

Children learning to become readers and writers need to be allowed to take risks as they approximate the conventional behaviors of expert readers and writers. Research has revealed that children pass through stages which some would minimize their activity and efforts as "not really reading" when in actuality these are critical stages that almost all children pass through on their way to conventional reading. Instead of being dismissed as unimportant, these moments need to be recognized and celebrated. The same is true as children learn to write. We now know that the scribbling and invented spellings of young children are representative of stages that they pass through on their way toward conventional writing and spelling. To expect young readers and writers to act in conventional ways from their first ventures into learning to read and write is not only unreasonable, it could be damaging. An inappropriate early focus on accuracy and conventionality can negatively impact children's expectations and levels of engagement. To deny teachers the ability to use the approximations of their students as insights into what is really going on inside their heads, denies them the information they need to plan scaffolded instruction that is seen in the very best reading and writing programs. This also means that caution must be exercised in implementing reading programs and guidelines designed for young readers that overprivilege research based on expert readers and marginalizes research based on novice readers.

As mentioned, those teachers who have the greatest impact on students' reading and writing performances make extensive use of scaffolded instruction. They have invested time learning where their students are at in reading and writing. They know what their students need to know next to become stronger readers and writers. They know how to plan instruction that builds a bridge -- or a scaffold -- between those two points. This depends on providing appropriate specific individual feedback to students. A teacher's response to a student following the reading or writing of a text is one of the most effective tools for providing that scaffolded instruction. A child's oral reading miscues provides the teacher with information to structure strategic questions to ask the child in assisting the construction of more balanced use of strategies as they read and make sense of print. A child's retelling of a story provides signals for a teacher to use in assisting the child to come to a deeper, richer understanding of a text. A child's invented spellings in his or her story begin to reveal patterns to work on with the child during an individual conference. The stories children create give information to teachers as they plan focus lessons related to the composing process. Simply put, effective teachers provide effective response based on the specific reading and writing behaviors of their students. One should see that in effective reading and writing programs.

In the best reading and writing programs, children read and write. While children learn and practice specific skills and strategies in these programs, they also practice those skills and strategies in meaningful contexts. Time is set aside for children to read and write. . It's hard to become a reader or writer if I never get to experience what it means to be a reader or writer. It's hard to value reading and writing if all I do is practice the skills and never get to experience the joy of reading books or writing stories. Efforts are also made to encourage children to read and write beyond the school walls.

In creating readers and writers, ultimately we must trust students with some responsibility in developing their reading and writing habits. In the best reading and writing programs, this is accomplished by building in choice. While choices might not be completely unrestricted, children are taught how to choose appropriate books so that they can make decisions about their personal reading. They are taught a variety of ways to respond to what they have read, so they can choose appropriate ways to share their reading with others. They are provided a variety of forums so they can choose who they work with in learning more about the reading process and books being read. Similarly, choice is built into writing programs as children are taught how to choose topics to write about. Children are exposed to a variety of writing formats so they can choose how best to express their thoughts and ideas. Children are provided a variety of structures so they can choose who to work with in improving their writing. How does a child take responsibility for their reading and writing if every decision in their reading and writing program is made for the child? A child needs to be taught how to make choices and allowed to make choices as a part of their reading and writing program.

But in the end, the child must be engaged in the learning process in order to become better at reading and writing. Engagement is the key. Immersion in a print-rich environment with access to materials makes little difference if the child does not take advantage of it. The very best demonstrations and modeling make little difference if the child does not pay attention to them. Classroom time set aside to practice reading and writing makes little difference if a child doesn't use it. Having high expectations for a child make little difference if the child doesn't believe it. All of the other conditions are ultimately dependent on the child being engaged. Engagement has been defined as the "visible outcome of motivation...self-regulated behavior in the pursuit of a goal." In those classrooms where exemplary teachers were making the greatest impact, an engagement level of 90-90 was observed by researchers -- 90% of the students on task 90% of the time. Engagement is often dependent on the student seeing the task within their reach, valuing the outcome of the task and feeling safe as they complete the task. If any one of those variables is missing, engagement can break down. If this happens, the impact of the other conditions of language learning will not be as great.

So if you want to teach a child to be a reader or writer:

- Immerse the child in an environment in which they have easy access to the resources they need.
- Use modeling by experts to provide the child with demonstrations of what it takes to be a reader and a writer.
- Hold high expectations that the children will become readers and writers and help them see themselves in the same way.
- Provide them frequent specific individual response praising what they can do and moving them closer to what they need to do next to become stronger readers and writers.
- Create ample opportunities for them to practice reading and writing in meaningful situations.
- Allow them choices as they take responsibility for their reading and writing activities and efforts.
- But most importantly, get them engaged in the learning process by structuring instruction so that they can sense the possibility of successful, will value the outcome and feel safe doing it.

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