I’m 30 years old, but I read at the 34-year-old level.
— Comedian Dana Carvey

In a December 2007 New Yorker article, “Twilight of the Books,” author Caleb Crain laments the decline of literacy in the United States, citing a number of studies indicating that “Americans are losing not just the will to read but even the ability.” Crain reports that, “readers are more likely than non-readers to play sports, exercise, visit art museums, attend theater, paint, go to music events, take photos, and volunteer. Proficient readers are more likely to vote. Perhaps readers venture so readily outside because what they experience in solitude gives them confidence.”


While we wouldn’t disagree with Crain’s point, it does beg the question of whether the cause-and-effect relationship works both ways. That is, do experiences motivate reading? We believe they do and, based on our work in developing literate children and young adults, feel that Crain, and perhaps many of those researchers he cites, have overlooked the powerful interchange between young people’s experiences in the world and what they read. We believe that it is these experiences that give students the curiosity and motivation to learn more from text and the confidence to pursue their interests. The cycle of experience and reading — a cycle of life to text and text to life — is at the heart of literacy and learning.

Perhaps it’s equally true that those who vote are inclined to read because they are eager to be more informed about what’s at stake. The same can be said for anyone who plays sports, exercises, visits art museums, attends theater, paints, attends musical events, takes photos, and volunteers in the...
community. Children and young adults actively engaged in pursuing their interests are more likely to read because they want to find out more about what they like to do and get better at it.

CONQUERING A READING LIST

The problem is that the life-to-text and text-to-life cycle is not addressed in most schools because it runs counter to the prevailing notions about what should be read, when, and how. By and large, schools ignore the power of students’ interests to provide the motivation to read and fail to exploit the experience-to-reading-to-experience cycle. Instead, schools genuflect to the prescribed canon about what is important to read and when it must be read, thereby reducing the quest for literacy to the conquest of a reading list.

Consequently, many young people come to associate reading with schooling rather than with learning more about what interests them, both in their broad and focused investigations. What schools teach, subliminally if not overtly, about real-world literacy is actually antithetical to what we wish for our young people. School teaches that literacy is about a set of skills, not a way to engage a part of the world that a young person may care about.

But schools are poorly designed to learn about and respond to what students care about. Therefore, schools create a tension between teachers and students that is revealed in these words of a student at one of our Big Picture schools.

Jake points out that “learning by doing and learning by reading — those are two of my main things. It’s a point of contention between me and teachers in general because I feel as though I can teach myself almost anything.” Jake designed and manufactured his own trawl fishing nets for his internship project. Jake’s words testify to the broken cycle between life to text and text to life, a cycle damaged by the very pedagogical process that schools put in place.

Students come to understand the broken cycle early on, and they respond in ways that we wouldn’t want from any adult or child. A 4th grader actually read the state standards and told his teacher, “I read the new state standards, and I’ve been reading books that are this thick (he made a visual notation with his index finger and thumb about two inches), but now the state standards say I have to read 40 books a year. I won’t read that many thick books that interest me any more. From now on, I’m going to read smaller, slimmer books so I can read the 40 that you all want me to read.”

Seymour Sarason advocated an approach that appeals to us. He suggested, with tongue in cheek, that schools be prohibited from teaching reading to any student until the student asked to be taught. What, he asked, would teachers need to do in order to have every student ask to be taught how to read?

Our answer is simple: Engage young people around their interests and provide lots of opportunities for them to discover firsthand how reading can help them pursue those interests more broadly and deeply. We don’t dispute the necessity of skills, but young people need reasons — theirs as well as ours — to practice or

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develop those skills. As their interests blossom into
hobbies and career aspirations, students will be dis-
posed to use and hone their reading skills in order to
learn.

Another of our students, Ziary, is preparing for a
nursing career and has become an eclectic and vor-
cious reader of nursing texts as well as home remedy
books and medical fiction. Her latest read, *First, Do
No Harm*, is a nonfiction account that traces the lives
of patients, doctors, and hospital administrators at a
Texas hospital as they struggle with ethical decisions
related to measuring the worth of life. The book ex-
amines issues of quality of life versus longevity, one of
her particular interests. Most of the time, she carries
the *Physicians’ Desk Reference* with her to look up un-
familiar terms and medicines.

**ENCOURAGE THE CURIOSITY**

Schools’ current approach to literacy development,
including their approach to assessing it, is actually cre-
ating what Pierre Bayard, the French intellectual, calls
scientific readers — skilled readers who choose not to
read because of what they have learned about reading
that isn’t so. Of course, reading is declining because
we have so many other options for learning, but we
suspect that this overly scientific approach to skills de-
velopment also contributes to the decline.

Most adults who do read choose what to read based
on their interests, regardless of the grade or age level
at which they read. In many cases, these mature life-
to-text reading habits were developed in their younger
years through their own desire to seek further informa-
tion and enjoyment about something nurtured
through the culture in their families and in their
schools.

Kindergarteners and senior citizens show the same
habits and curiosities, regardless of their reading level.
The more people access books and use their reading
skills, the better at reading they become over time.
Literacy is much more about habits of mind than a
reductionist approach to skills development.

Research in another area reveals how such habits
are developed. Researchers studying nutrition and di-
eting have found that whether people dieted or not,
they weighed the same and their health remained the
same. Dieting and proper food have little impact on
health. What did matter? What mattered was what
might be called the “long haul” effect. Weight gain is
measured by a few dozen extra calories a day that, over
the years, add pounds. The incremental change is not
easily measurable in the span of a year or two. It’s the

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changes our habits.

accretion of these incremental changes — implicit
and explicit choices — that affect weight and health,
choices that require disciplined attention to patterns
and habits.

Like weight management, we need to help our
youth develop habits and ingrained — both tacit and
explicit — practices of literacy that will stay with
them for the long haul, not short-term “measurable
results” that do nothing for them in the long run.
Over time, reading to pursue our interests changes
our habits. It becomes second nature, embedded in
the way we come to use literacy as a way to identify
new problems and develop insights about solving
them and, more generally, as a way to become in-
formed, advance in our careers, and participate in
family and civic life.

The observant teacher or parent will be wise to get
young adults reading around their interests to bring
text to life and life to text in a never-ending cycle.
And, in doing so, have them unlearn the untruths that
schools have taught them about literacy, learning, and
life.

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